

## CHAPTER II

### THE CONGRESS SPLIT OF 1969: MRS. GANDHI'S EMERGENCE AS A LEADER IN HER OWN RIGHT

The central focus of this study, as has been indicated in the Introduction (Chapter - I) is to comprehend and analyse Mrs. Indira Gandhi's leadership in India's democracy. This chapter is organised in three sections - (i) the initial years of Mrs. Gandhi's extraordinary political apprenticeship and her becoming the prime minister; (ii) the significance of the fourth general elections of 1967; (iii) the Congress split of 1969 and its repercussions on the Indian political scene. The aim of this chapter is to examine and understand the circumstances through which Mrs. Gandhi became a leader in her own right. She did become prime minister first, graduating later to become a national leader of the country.

#### THE INITIAL YEARS

Mrs. Gandhi's long political apprenticeship under Nehru must start as a focal point in tracing the trajectory of her political career as a leader of the world's largest democracy. It will therefore be pertinent to find out how far Nehru consciously groomed her to take over the mantle from him, or to point out if at all he evinced any interest in her political leanings. One thing remains clear in most observations<sup>1</sup> that

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Brecher, Zareer Masani, Krishna Bhatia, Dom Moraes, M.J. Akbar, Inder Malhotra, Katherine Frank et al.

Nehru's need for someone to organise the social side of his life made him increasingly dependent on his daughter whom he summoned frequently to Delhi. Nehru needed Indira Gandhi to keep house for him and to act as his official hostess. Accordingly she migrated to Delhi in 1946 to be by his side. Inder Malhotra pointed out that Indira Gandhi was not just housekeeper and hostess to her father.<sup>2</sup> Slowly but surely, her role was expanding. She soon became Nehru's confidant and counsellor as well. She accompanied him in all his foreign travels and was virtually treated as the first lady. This enabled her to establish an easy rapport with world leaders and facilitated her task when the time came for her to directly deal with them. She effortlessly imbibed statecraft simply by observing Nehru at work. While entertaining visiting dignitaries and their wives was an obvious strain, yet for Mrs. Gandhi it was also a splendid education in the nuances of power. Like her formal education, this political education too was 'staccato and scattered, but extremely unique.'<sup>3</sup> 'Teen Murti' gave Mrs. Gandhi the finest political training that a future prime minister could have acquired.<sup>4</sup> She was always around when world leaders discussed wide ranging international issues with her father and when politicians brought to him their problems and disputes, it gave her an opportunity to see and hear how they were handled. She

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<sup>2</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 60.

<sup>3</sup> M.J. Akbar, *Nehru: The Making of India* (London: Viking, 1988), 525.

<sup>4</sup> Krishna Bhatia, *Indira: A Biography of Prime Minister Gandhi* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1974), 137-138.

was able to gather a rich store of political experience and understanding of men and matters.

Just after independence, when Gandhiji was alive, G.B. Pant, who had in 1937 inducted Nehru's sister Vijaylaxmi Pandit into the first Congress ministry in Uttar Pradesh, asked Mrs. Gandhi to join U.P. politics or enter the assembly. Mrs. Gandhi turned down the suggestion. But she began accompanying Nehru on his election tours from the very first campaign. There were appeals to her to contest in 1952 from a constituency in Himachal Pradesh (Chamba), which she refused.<sup>5</sup>

Since one of Mrs. Gandhi's functions was to protect such privacy and leisure as Nehru could manage from his gruelling daily schedule, several party functionaries seeking his attention often had to be content with an audience with her. Nehru, for his part, began telling party colleagues to talk to Mrs. Gandhi. She soon became an important and influential conduit between her father and the Congress party.

In 1953 Mrs. Gandhi was given the responsibility of organizing the women's wing of the Congress. Akbar believed that Nehru may have been careful about not being seen to take any initiative personally but quite evidently used trusted colleagues or juniors to prod his daughter's political career.<sup>6</sup> In 1956 she became the president of the Allahabad Congress Committee. In 1957 she was

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<sup>5</sup> M.J. Akbar, *Nehru: The Making of India*, 525.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 526.

elected to the Central Election Committee, a critical job in an election year. She campaigned all over the country in the 1957 elections in which Lal Bahadur Shastri was placed in overall charge. Mrs. Gandhi and Shastri worked closely together and the Congress did even better than in 1952.

Mrs. Gandhi had done commendable work in the 1957 elections particularly in mobilising women. She was invited to become a member of the Congress Working Committee. She agreed but chose to take an elective seat on the Committee rather than be nominated by the President. Krishna Bhatia observed that with her election to the Congress Working Committee, Mrs. Gandhi had taken what may be regarded as the first step on the road that ultimately led her to national leadership. The organisational wing of the party had lost much of its former prestige and a large measure of its real power had shifted to the parliamentary wing. Her move was however significant in that she took it after serious deliberation. It could have represented a real change in her own view of her role. Her election was never in doubt and she polled the largest number of votes. By foregoing the convenience of a nomination, Mrs. Gandhi seemed to have indicated that she was ready to accept the rough and tumble of electoral politics. She had placed her own foot on the bottom rung of the ladder of political authority. In the next two years she rose further, eventually to become a member of the Congress Parliamentary Board, which is to

the Congress what the politburo is to the communist parties. This was a remarkably rapid rise in the party hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

In January 1959 the Congress unanimously named Mrs. Gandhi to succeed U.N. Dhebar as party president. The powerful chief of the Tamil Nadu Congress, K. Kamaraj and G. B. Pant, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, were among the main enthusiasts behind the move. Indira Gandhi was elected Congress President, unopposed, the third Nehru and the fourth woman after Annie Besant, Nellie Sengupta and Sarojini Naidu. The Congress presidentship still retained a great deal of prestige which Mrs. Gandhi was expected to enhance because of her youth, (she was forty-one years old only) her special access to Nehru and a mildly radical image.

Though she was elected for a two-year term she gave up the post after only a year partly because of ill-health. For another, she thought it was beyond her or anybody else to change the deeply entrenched nature of the Congress, which had transformed itself from a freedom movement into an efficient election machine and little else.<sup>8</sup> Riven with factionalism and charges of corruption, the Congress was in a state of severe demoralisation. Akbar noted that Mrs. Gandhi's remedy for this was a mixture of self-criticism within party circles and a counter-offensive against other parties in public. The party, she held, had to change with the times, involve more people in its activities and pick itself up.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> M. J. Akbar, *Nehru: The Making of India*, 528.

Mrs. Gandhi's truncated tenure as Congress President was dominated by two major events. One which won her acclaim all round was the reversal of a decision concerning Bombay, taken by Nehru over two years earlier. In 1957 when the country's political map was being redrawn along linguistic lines, two exceptions were made. In Punjab the Sikh community's demand for a purely Punjabi speaking state was rejected on the ground that people there used both Punjabi and Hindi. The old Bombay presidency which was sprawled across both Gujarati-speaking and Marathi-speaking areas was also retained as a bilingual unit. This was done despite the insistence of both language groups on separate states of their own. They however could not agree on the future of the flourishing city of Bombay which geographically belonged to Marathi-speaking Maharashtra, but had become the country's commercial capital because of massive investments by Gujratis and other non-Marathis. A suggestion that Bombay be made a separate city-state, caused widespread riots in Marathi areas. The enforced union of the two in bilingual Bombay thus continued. But the arrangement did not work. The sentiment in favour of linguistic states was too strong on both sides. Gujarati resistance to Bombay's inclusion in Maharashtra wore down fast. The old decision of the Congress leadership had to be undone. Nehru had to be persuaded to understand the changed situation. Mrs. Gandhi was able to do this. In May 1960 when the separate states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were inaugurated amidst tremendous

popular enthusiasm, Mrs. Gandhi was much praised though she was no longer the party president.

On the second major event during her presidentship of the Congress, Mrs. Gandhi's imprint was even deeper as also very controversial. The issue in this case had to do with Kerala. In the general elections of 1957 the Communist Party of India made history by coming to power in Kerala through a free and fair poll. This became the cause of considerable alarm in India. There was deep distrust of the intentions of the Communists so much so that there was widespread public outcry against two bills passed in the state legislature – an agrarian reform bill and the Education bill – both moderately reformist in nature. The Christian Church, the Muslim League and the Nair Service Society, all controlling numerous educational institutions and landed estates in the state, were in the forefront of the agitation which soon translated into a mass movement for the removal of the Communist ministry. The Congress party in the state made common cause with the agitationists.

The Congress leadership in New Delhi was divided in its opinion. Nehru argued that the central government's extra-ordinary powers should not be exercised to settle scores with a duly elected ministry in a state.<sup>10</sup> He favoured a policy of persuading the Communists of Kerala to put the two controversial bills to a fresh vote by the people. The Kerala Chief Minister Mr. Namboodiripad refused to accept the advice of the Prime Minister. Mrs. Gandhi raised a national

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<sup>10</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 64.

outcry against the Communists and personally intervened in the “direct action” that was launched against the Kerala government. Mr. Namboodiripad firmly believed that she played a major role in getting his government dismissed in July 1959 under Article 356.<sup>11</sup> Congressmen believed that Nehru would not have been persuaded but for Mrs. Gandhi’s influence.

That Mrs. Gandhi had influence was accepted.<sup>12</sup> She was widely believed to have been instrumental in convincing Nehru to drop Krishna Menon after the Chinese debacle and thereby deflect the mounting criticism within the party towards Menon. Her stature in the country after her stint as Congress President was now much higher than that of a prime minister’s daughter. Mrs. Gandhi’s politics in Kerala paid dividends when the Congress in alliance with the Praja Socialist Party and the Muslim League swept the polls in the special elections held in February 1960, winning 93 seats against the Communist Party of India’s 29.

Mrs. Gandhi gave up the Congress presidentship sometime later that year and by the year-end she was nominated to the executive board of the UNESCO by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. She was also active as chairperson of the Congress National Integration Council. After the communal riots in Jabalpur in 1961 she worked tirelessly to help the riot victims. In the 1962 general elections Mrs. Gandhi was the star campaigner for the Congress Party.

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<sup>11</sup> M.J. Akbar, *Nehru: The Making of India*, 529.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



During 1963-64 Nehru seemed to withdraw from politics. According to Michael Brecher there were several reasons for such withdrawal.<sup>13</sup> Nehru's external policy suffered a severe jolt. India's internal problems seemed to be growing even after seventeen years of independence. The third five-year plan was in difficulty, food was in short supply, foreign exchange reserves were almost nil, communal tension had reappeared and finally Congress, seemingly sick in body and spirit, was struck by a major blow. In the spring of 1963 the Congress suffered three prestigious electoral defeats in the Lok Sabha by-elections from Amroha, Farukabad and Rajkot. The victors were Nehru's most vociferous critics – J. B. Kriplani, Ram Manohar Lohia and Minoos Masani respectively. By this time the question of Mrs. Gandhi succeeding Nehru kept recurring and it generated a lot of speculation about Nehru's role in this. Michael Brecher observed that Nehru's thoughts on Mrs. Gandhi and the succession question remained obscure.<sup>14</sup> He may have had the temptation of a father to see his daughter in a prominent position of responsibility. But he had a strong aversion to the idea of a dynasty which he knew would have been widely resented. He must have known the mood of the Congress elite well enough to realise that they would not accept Mrs. Gandhi as his immediate successor. Nehru never promoted her in politics himself but he never restrained anyone else from promoting her either.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the latter might not have been possible but for the fact that

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Brecher, *Succession in India: A Study in Decision-making* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> M.J. Akbar, *Nehru: The Making of India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2002), 530.

Mrs. Gandhi took very naturally to politics and soon proved that she was good at it.

In fact, Nehru was mildly disapproving of his daughter becoming Congress President.<sup>16</sup> He viewed her as an adjunct to himself and not as a politically independent being. While he correctly sensed her indifference to parliamentary procedure and legal rules, he did underestimate her intelligence. He also apprehended the impression her elevation might give. He had stated that he would not like to appear to be encouraging some kind of dynastic arrangement. To him that would be wholly undemocratic and an undesirable thing and he insisted that he was not grooming her for anything. Nehru had always gone to great lengths to avoid any behaviour that could be interpreted as nepotism.

When T. T. Krishnamachari urged Nehru to make either Vijaylaxmi Pandit or Indira Gandhi as member of the cabinet, Nehru had shot back that neither of them would ever be in the cabinet as long as he was prime minister. Nehru was clearly unenthusiastic about Indira Gandhi's leadership of the Congress. In Malhotra's account, there was nothing to show that he did anything to project her into any position.<sup>17</sup> Nehru was believed to have told a press conference, "Normally speaking, it is not a good thing for my daughter to come in as Congress President when I am Prime Minister."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 250-251.

<sup>17</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 61-62.

<sup>18</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Nehrus and the Gandhis: An Indian Dynasty* (London: Picador, 2005), 138-139.

Krishna Bhatia thought that Nehru was misunderstood.<sup>19</sup> Nehru's statement that a future leader could well be from outside the legislature was indicative of his general philosophy of democratic government. It should not have been construed as his connivance at Mrs. Gandhi's elevation to the prime ministership. Even Welles Hagen, who wrote "After Nehru, who" in 1963, agreed with Frank Moraes that Nehru was too big a man to think in terms of a dynasty.<sup>20</sup> If Nehru really desired his daughter to succeed him he would have organised the succession when he was still alive. According to Rajni Kothari, an eminent political scientist, Nehru was concerned about the succession issue, but he persistently and adamantly refused to have a successor in his concern to avoid a sharp polarisation that could lead to irreconcilable divisions in the party and in the central government.<sup>21</sup> Keenly sensitive to the federal character of the country and the nature of coalition that the Congress represented, he wanted to avoid the decisions being made at the top. He often reiterated that he had enough faith in democracy not to intervene in the selection process which would take its natural course. Nehru believed that India's political system had achieved enough maturity to absorb his passing from the scene. He also had enough faith in the Congress party to select a person who would do justice to the high office. In this

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<sup>19</sup> Krishna Bhatia, *Indira: A Biography of Prime Minister Gandhi*, 160, 163.

<sup>20</sup> M.J. Akbar, *Nehru: the Making of India*, 531-532.

<sup>21</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1970), 309.

Nehru “showed not only a spirited conviction in the democratic process but also a remarkable appreciation of its dynamics.”<sup>22</sup>

The one person who knew who would succeed Nehru was Mrs. Gandhi. She recalled, “Sometime before my father’s death, an American called Welles Hangen had asked who would succeed him. Without hesitation, I had said, Mr. Shastri.”<sup>23</sup> The issue in early 1964 was not whether Mrs. Gandhi was a potential prime minister, but whether Nehru was doing anything to ensure that she succeeded him. Since by that time the succession issue had been settled in Shastri’s favour, the very notion that Nehru was still busy manipulating things on his daughter’s behalf was preposterous.<sup>24</sup> With Nehru’s passing away on May 27, 1964 Mrs. Gandhi’s extra-ordinary apprenticeship had come to an end.

#### *BECOMING INDIA’S PRIME MINISTER*

In June 1964 Shastri was elected unanimously as Nehru’s successor by the Congress Parliamentary Party and became India’s second prime minister. But after a mere nineteen months Shastri died at the height of his power and prestige on January 11, 1966. The stage was set for India’s second succession.<sup>25</sup> As in 1964 the constitutional vacuum was filled swiftly and smoothly. As the senior most minister of the union government on both occasions, it was Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda who assumed the post in accordance with the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 308.

<sup>23</sup> Indira Gandhi, *My Truth* (New Delhi: Vision Books Pvt. Ltd., 1980), 88-89.

<sup>24</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Brecher, *Succession in India*, 190.

President's view that the office of the prime minister must not remain vacant.

Brecher observed that politics seemed to have been outwardly suspended the day Shastri died for certain moves were set afoot.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Nehru's, Shastri's death was sudden and unforeseen. No prior agreement on his successor existed even within the Syndicate. In Brecher's opinion, to those who were conscious of the 1964 precedent, there were three differences : (a) a marked feeling of self-confidence, that there was the widespread feeling that if Shastri could govern India for the past nineteen months, then anyone could ; (b) there was no imminent sense of urgency, for unlike in 1964, the attention of the world was not upon India ; (c) the struggle was bound to be more complex since the caucus did not have a consensus candidate, for they had not given thought to "after Shastri, who?"

A couple of days after Shastri's death, the number of aspirants for prime ministership had risen to seven – Morarji Desai, Indira Gandhi, Gulzarilal Nanda, Y. V. Chavan, S. K. Patil, Sanjeeva Reddy and Kamaraj himself. There was near unanimity on one point – that Desai had to be prevented from becoming prime minister, because of his inflexibility and obduracy. Kamaraj was persuaded by fellow Syndicate member, S. K. Patil to accept the proposal. Kamaraj knew he had no national following. His refusal cleared the way for Mrs. Gandhi, especially in view of the general elections to be held in the following year – the first since Nehru's death. Mrs. Gandhi was a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 193.

national leader who spoke Hindi and English. She was not identified with any caste, region, religion or faction; she was popular among Muslims, Harijans and other minorities and with the poor. Above all, she was a "Nehru". For all these reasons, she emerged as Kamaraj's choice. Concerted moves to persuade Kamaraj however continued, until he remarked that he was not interested in the prime ministership and that in an election year the Congress Presidency was the most important office.<sup>27</sup> Morarji Desai, Y.V. Chavan and Mrs. Gandhi were still in the fray. Morarji Desai refused to canvass for support and seek allies. He displayed utter contempt and intolerance for coalitions with other persons and interests, revealing a rigidity of mind that was singularly unsuitable for as 'national' an office as that of the prime minister.

When the caucus met at Sanjeeva Reddy's residence on January 13, 1966 there were three enduring features in the developing decision process: Morarji Desai's obstinacy to fight to the bitter end; the decision of Kamaraj and the Syndicate to keep Morarji out; and the firm resolve of Kamaraj not to stand despite Atulya Ghosh's continued pressure. Of the remaining candidates, Patil, Reddy and Jagjivan Ram were either not serious or were marginal. This left Nanda, Chavan and Mrs. Gandhi. Once again the caucus was split and failed to reach agreement.<sup>28</sup> This was followed by several rounds of meetings and confabulations. Desai's veto against a consensus candidate set in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 201. It was probably said to ward off Atulya Ghosh's ploy to move into the Congress Presidency – the key to vast patronage and influence – in an election year.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 206-207.

motion new forces in the ongoing decision-making process and imposed compelling pressure on the Syndicate to find a coalitional candidate to defeat him.

Mrs. Gandhi emerged as a coalitional candidate by a process of elimination, not because she was strong but because of the various shortcomings and drawbacks of the other contenders and the need for the Syndicate and the chief ministers to agree on someone who could defeat Desai. Mrs. Gandhi was everything that Desai was not. For the Congress seniors her greatest qualification was her weakness or more accurately, their perception that she was weak.<sup>29</sup> So the choice of Mrs. Gandhi was actually a negative decision provoked by her political ambiguity and indistinctness. Kamaraj had convinced his followers that Mrs. Gandhi would do their bidding and that they could run the show by remote control. They would thereby enjoy that form of political power which gave the privileges of decision without the responsibilities. They believed that this could be possible not only because Mrs. Gandhi lacked administrative experience but also because she was a woman. The perception was that she could perform as a figure-head. As a "Nehru" she would crucially help with the 1967 general elections for Congress after which a suitable replacement could be found to succeed her.

Mrs. Gandhi was the choice not only of Kamaraj but also of the powerful Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, D. P. Mishra who was a key

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<sup>29</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 290-291. Also, Sudipta Kaviraj, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (September 20-27, 1986), 1697.

player in this second succession. Because of his influence with other chief ministers, Mishra was able to persuade eight chief ministers to support Mrs. Gandhi and on January 15, 1966 they issued a statement of support. The eight chief ministers represented Andhra, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madras, Mysore, Orissa and Rajasthan. On the same day chief ministers of West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Bihar joined in support of Mrs. Gandhi's candidature so that she had a total of twelve out of fourteen chief ministers. Only Gujarat, Morarji Desai's home state and U.P., whose chief minister Mrs. Sucheta Kriplani owed her position to Morarji's ally C. B. Gupta, remained aloof. This act of issuing a statement of support in favour of Mrs. Gandhi's candidature assured her of prime ministership.<sup>30</sup>

These events indicated the dynamics of decision – making at the summit of Indian politics. These were bound to have far-reaching implications for the balance of influence in all-India politics during the post-Shastri phase. Several critical questions pertaining to the nature of political equations emerged.<sup>31</sup> For instance, was this a revolt from below, a genuine initiative by the state leaders to impose their will and their candidate by a public display of collective strength or was there collusion with the Congress President? Was it inspired, induced, even

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<sup>30</sup> After Nehru's death the battles over the succession issue highlighted the problems of choosing a prime minister when the party lacked an acknowledged leader. It marked the clear ascendancy of state over national authority. The chief ministers were already emerging as powerful figures within the Congress Party. The choice of prime minister demonstrated that the central leadership was becoming more and more dependent upon the chief ministers. B. A. V. Sharma, "Congress and the Federal Balance," in Ram Joshi and R. K. Hebsur (Ed.), *Congress in Indian Politics: A Centenary Perspective* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1987), 105-106.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Brecher, *Succession in India*, 210.



managed by the Congress President to wipe away all remaining opposition to his choice? Did this act mark a qualitative shift in the distribution of power between the centre and the units of the Indian federation or did it represent the reassertion of the primacy of the all-India organisational wing of the party? The answer to these questions at that time must have been tentative but after the vast passage of time it is possible to reflect on the complexity of those events and what repercussions they had for future politics.

The states had begun exercising an influence since Nehru's days as was evident in the decision-making process involving the issue of language and the linguistic reorganisation of states. After his death, in the absence of his vigorous and central leadership, powerful state chief ministers began in Shastri's tenure to be more assertive in national politics.<sup>32</sup> This second succession had witnessed an apparent setback on the consensus issue indicating a declining influence of the Syndicate. It also witnessed the emergence of an alliance between the Congress Party President and the state government leaders that is the chief ministers. The party chiefs at the state level played a marginal role. There was a possibility that both the Congress party president and state chief ministers shared certain common interests that were mutually recognised and which formed the basis of their alliance, namely, to beat Morarji Desai and to create the best possible image for Congress for the general elections of 1967.

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<sup>32</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1987), 133.

The events that finally brought an end to the second succession signified the beginnings of certain shifts in the institutional balance of the political system such as the relationship between party organisation and government, parliament, state governments and state party units. Rajni Kothari observed that the election of Mrs. Gandhi underscored certain developments which were different from the Nehru succession.<sup>33</sup> He pointed out that Mr. Kamaraj had not been permitted to find out the "consensus" and declare it, for there were reasons to believe that anxious members of the Congress parliamentary party had requested Kamaraj not to by-pass it as had been done in the last leadership contest. Secondly, there was no clear choice as in the case with Shastri. Thirdly, for the first time the Congress parliamentary party was polarised on the choice of a leader through a ballot indicating that the decision was the result of a keenly contested election in the Congress Parliamentary Party. Fourth, the state chief ministers like D. P. Mishra exercised a far more direct and active role than in 1964. This showed that the states had been involved for the first time in electing someone to a "national" office thereby increasing the scope and domain of their political activity in years to come. Moreover the group equations within the Congress structure that aggregated at the level of the centre provided a background to the sharpening of factional positions. This would

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<sup>33</sup> Rajni Kothari, "India: The Congress System on Trial," in *Asian Survey* (February, 1967), 83-85.

become evident in the next couple of years culminating in the split of 1969.

On January 19, 1966 Mrs. Gandhi was elected India's third prime minister with an overwhelming majority after Morarji Desai refused to give up without a fight. The vote was 355 to 169 in favour of Mrs. Gandhi. India's third prime minister was the second woman in history after Smt. Sirimavo Bandarnaike of Sri Lanka to be elected leader of a modern nation state.

Mrs. Gandhi's election as prime minister was mainly due to the support of the dominant coalition consisting of the four southern states and the non-Hindi-speaking states of West Bengal and Maharashtra on the one hand, and the coalition of Hindi-speaking states on the other. So actually there were two overlapping coalitions created for the twin objectives stated above. That Mrs. Gandhi owed her election to the Congress President and a coalition of chief ministers was an indication of the new trend towards divergence within the Congress.<sup>34</sup>

Mrs. Gandhi's election as prime minister was viewed by many as an ad hoc arrangement designed to fill the gap until the 1967 general elections. It was felt that the Congress could capitalise on Mrs. Gandhi's assets which were viewed to be impressive: wide popular appeal enhanced by the Nehru name and mantle and the best possible

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley A. Kochanek, *The Congress Party of India: The Dynamics of One-party Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 98. This view is also held by J.W. Bjorkman and K. Mathur, "India: How a Government Party Decays when Government Swallows Party" in J. Blondel and Maurizio Cotta (Eds.), *Party and Government: An Enquiry Into The Relationship Between Governments and Supporting Parties in Liberal Democracies* (U.S.A.: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 229-234.

public image of the Congress in the general election, enhanced by her association with Uttar Pradesh the largest state in the union.

As Kochanek noted that right from the very beginning of her term as Prime Minister of India, it was evident that Mrs. Gandhi was not going to be the puppet as some senior Congress leaders had expected.<sup>35</sup> In the process of cabinet formation she attempted to remove Gulzarilal Nanda, one of the old guards, from his strategic position as Home Minister. Nevertheless, while preserving a semblance of continuity by making only slight alterations in Shastri's Cabinet, Mrs. Gandhi managed to institute changes that were quite significant. Jagjivan Ram was brought back to the cabinet. Manubhai Shah was promoted to cabinet rank; Asoka Mehta, G. S. Pathak and Fakruddin Ali Ahmed were inducted into the new cabinet. Modest though the changes were, the purpose was to inject new blood in sufficient measure to make observers recall that Shastri had retained the Nehru cabinet virtually unchanged in 1964. As a result Brecher concluded, though Mrs. Gandhi's action might not have been "drastic enough for everyone, yet a new look had come to the summit of India's government."<sup>36</sup> It was this new look that upset Kamaraj in whose perception there appeared to be merging around Mrs. Gandhi an influential young clique. This young clique consisted of Y. B. Chavan, C. Subramaniam and Asoka Mehta. The move to drop Nanda was believed to have been instigated by this group. Despite this, in the

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<sup>35</sup> Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), 43.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Brecher, *Succession in India*, 225.

early months of Mrs. Gandhi's term, Kamaraj worked harmoniously with her even when he was not in complete agreement with her. They did closely cooperate at first.

India in January 1966 was in a worse shape than it had been either under Nehru or Shastri. Mrs. Gandhi had inherited a difficult position. Two successive years of severe drought caused a calamitous fall in agricultural production and brought about a severe crisis in food management. Prices of food grains shot up by 40 percent in two years. There was an urgent need for large-scale public distribution of food grains. In 1966-67 over 14 million tones were sold through public outlets. There was no way of mobilising such large supplies from the home production. The supplies could be got only through import of over 10 million tones. India's foreign exchange reserves were low--only 383 million dollars and a part of that had to be earmarked for repayment to the International Monetary Fund.<sup>37</sup>

There was agitation in Punjab for a separate Punjabi – speaking state. In the North-East the Naga people were threatening secession and Mrs. Gandhi set about developing a policy towards them. She also continued the policy of opening up the economy which over the years had got shackled with myriad controls. Since resulting distortions were inhibiting growth, Mrs. Gandhi took up a programme of selective decontrol.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Asoka Mehta, *A Decade of Indian Politics: 1966-1977* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company Ltd, 1979), 30-32.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

On these policy areas, Kamaraj and Mrs. Gandhi cooperated and worked closely. Kochanek observed that the inevitable differences in outlook did not prevent the Congress President and the Prime Minister from acting in harmony.<sup>39</sup> Differences and friction between the two emerged with Mrs. Gandhi's decision to devalue the rupee in 1966. The rift resulted from Mrs. Gandhi's attempt to move boldly and vigorously. She insisted, as Nehru had argued at the outset of his own term as prime minister, that prior discussion of certain delicate issues was imprudent. Only complete secrecy of deliberations could have prevented adverse economic repercussions. Thus Kamaraj was informed of the government decision to devalue the rupee before it was publicly announced. He was not invited to participate in the making of the decision. The rift also derived from the fact that her style differed so markedly from the consensus – building approach of Shastri. In the opinion of Asoka Mehta, Mrs. Gandhi's character was exclusionary.<sup>40</sup> Her exclusionary nature prevented her from confiding in any colleague. Her predilection for independent action clashed with Kamaraj's concept of collective leadership. Her insistence on devaluation in the face of strident opposition revealed two crucial elements in her emerging political character. She was capable of taking an unpopular decision and that she felt beholden to no one.<sup>41</sup>

Mrs. Gandhi's prime ministership was, at that point of time, confronted by a series of crippling events. Her devaluation decision

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<sup>39</sup> Stanley A. Kochanek, *The Congress Party of India*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Asoka Mehta, *A Decade of Indian Politics*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 299.

was severely attacked by the right as well as the left. The press, the public, the Congress party in Parliament and Parliament in general all raised their voice against the move. The government's plans for economic development and improvement faced a setback when the monsoon failed for the second year in a row creating severe food shortages and rampant inflation. Finally a wave of violence swept the country: government workers demonstrated to obtain higher pay, students rebelled against the dismal conditions prevalent in Indian universities, violence erupted in Andhra Pradesh over the location of a new steel plant under the Fourth Plan and rioting took place outside Parliament over demands that the government take action to prevent cow slaughter. These were pressing problems and there appeared to be a breakdown of law and order. It appeared that the new government was weak and devoid of direction.

Having reshuffled the Union Cabinet after Nanda's resignation, Mrs. Gandhi and her new Home Minister Chavan moved on to meet the most pressing threats to stability. She also sought to take action to restore coordination between party and government. But with the fourth general election of 1967 round the corner, there was much that had to be set right, for example, her position within the Syndicate.

Despite the government's ability to recover control and the resumption of party-government coordination, it was believed that as the general election approached a change in government was almost inevitable. Such conjecture seemed to be supported by the fact that the process of candidate selection revealed divided leadership at the

centre. The Congress Parliamentary Board in December 1966 set about selecting party candidates for the general elections due in February 1967. Mrs. Gandhi discovered to her consternation that the Syndicate was calling the shots and she herself had very little to say in a matter of utmost importance to her. She felt she could not be sure of her continuance as prime minister after the poll if she could not get enough of her supporters accommodated in the Congress list.<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Gandhi's fate as prime minister depended on the results of an election that was described as 'more unpredictable than any since independence'.<sup>43</sup> But whatever the electoral fortunes of the Congress as such, her re-election would depend on the ability of those who opposed her leadership to agree on a successor. The process of divergence that had set into the Congress since 1963 had in Kochanek's opinion, led to open conflict and it would ultimately lead to its disintegration. The process of divergence between 1963-67 was marked by a weakening of centralised power and by the emergence of factionalism within the Congress elite. The passing away of Nehru and Sashtri left the national leadership of the party in the hands of a group of leaders who drew their support from different institutional bases of power. The object of contention among them was prime ministership. Their inability to reach a consensus resulted in an open contest from which Mrs. Gandhi had emerged victorious. That was why many Congress leaders viewed her election as an interim

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<sup>42</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley A. Kochanek, *The Congress Party of India*, 102-103.



arrangement. It was the Syndicate which had foisted her and she was to be beholden to it. She was expected to face the fourth general elections in this frame of mind.

#### THE FOURTH GENERAL ELECTIONS AND MRS. GANDHI

The fourth general elections of 1967 have been considered a watershed for Indian politics primarily on account of the ramifications it has had for the Congress party as an organisation.<sup>44</sup> It was the first major test of strength for Mrs. Gandhi since she had become leader of the Congress party and the prime minister of the nation. For Mrs. Gandhi, this election signified a step in the direction towards autonomy as a leader. Also it was clear, in the context of the 1967 elections, that Mrs. Gandhi felt very strongly that the Congress needed a new look and a younger look. In order to refurbish its image for improving its future performance at the hustings, the Congress needed to be placed firmly on the left of the centre.

By December 1966 when it was evident that she would have little to influence the Syndicate which was bent on making her feel obliged and at the same time inferior, in all matters of political decisions and governance, Mrs. Gandhi made a highly significant statement to the press. Referring to Kamaraj and Desai, who though not yet allies, yet wanted her out, she said, "Here is a question of whom the party wants and whom the people want. My position among

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Brecher, *Political Leadership in India: An Analysis of Elite Attitudes* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1969), 3. Moreover the first "natural" succession contest occurred in the aftermath of the 1967 elections, as the incumbent head of government competed with an older and more senior Congress leader for the post of prime minister.

the people is uncontested.<sup>45</sup> This was perhaps the first indication of Mrs. Gandhi's key strategy in the coming years. This would mark the beginning of a new phase in Indian politics that of plebiscitary politics. She cultivated and asserted a direct and personal relationship with the electorate by bypassing the party organisation, its rules and norms.<sup>46</sup> During the 1967 campaign Mrs. Gandhi did not adopt an issue-oriented ideological stance. She presented herself as the great provider and reconciler. In the words of Katherine Frank, "her relationship with the people was intimate and parental and unconnected to political institutions." She thus introduced a kind of politics that was known as "mass politics." She called upon people to engage in the political process in a way that nobody had done before. Mrs. Gandhi felt she was creating conditions that favoured mass involvement in politics. Mass politics occurred when large numbers of people engaged themselves in political activity outside of the procedures and rules instituted by a society to govern political action.<sup>47</sup> It is to be noted that mass politics was not necessarily antagonistic to liberal democratic values for it emphasised the need for the autonomy of social groups if order with freedom was to be secured.<sup>48</sup> Mrs. Gandhi's continued exhortation to the people to play a pro-active role paid dividends as was evident by the outcome of fifth general elections. From 1972 the restiveness of the people was

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<sup>45</sup> Cited in Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 300, and Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 103.

<sup>46</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 300.

<sup>47</sup> William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (London: Free Press, 1959), 227.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

reflected in the political turmoil during 1973-1974 culminating in the Emergency of 1975. Kornhauser of course had warned that mass politics, if it contravened constitutional order, degenerated into authoritarianism.

In 1967 she was clear in her objective. She was out to project her personality to as many of her countrymen as possible and to make them feel that no other leader cared for them as much as she did.<sup>49</sup> She travelled extensively from one end of the country to the other to establish this fact. Throughout January and February 1967, Mrs. Gandhi campaigned with a passion that fully demonstrated her intangible but powerful connection with the Indian people. The people came in large numbers to listen to her.

In a speech at her own constituency in Rai Barielly, she explained, "My family is not confined to a few individuals. It consists of scores of people. Your burdens are comparatively light, because your families are limited and viable. But my burden is manifold because scores of my family members are poverty-stricken and I have to look after them. Since they belong to different castes and creeds, they sometimes fight among themselves and I have to intervene especially to look after the weaker members of my family so that the stronger ones do not take advantage of them."<sup>50</sup> Katherine Frank commented that as a campaigner Mrs. Gandhi proved to be the most charismatic leader since Gandhi.<sup>51</sup> Her approach and language were

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<sup>49</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Nehrus and the Gandhis*, 161.

<sup>51</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: the Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 301.

populist and as Ayesha Jalal observed, that like many a charismatic leader before her, Mrs. Gandhi claimed to give voice to the frustrations of the dispossessed and the down-trodden and to erode the existing structures of domination and privilege.<sup>52</sup> Her popularity increased throughout the country. Mrs. Gandhi developed a style which her largely peasant audiences could relate to. She spoke simply so that they could easily understand what she was trying to convey but she never attempted to educate them politically in the way Nehru did.<sup>53</sup> Nehru was in the habit of talking to people about serious problems with a view to making them more aware and more critical. Initially this worked but later on they merely listened to him in silence, when they realised that Congress could not deliver what it had promised. Mrs. Gandhi's message on the other hand was full of common sense.

The fourth general elections were held in February 1967. The results proved to be shocking, and for the Congress it was a miserable time. The Congress vote was down to 40.7 percent from 44.7 percent polled in 1962.<sup>54</sup> In a house of 520 seats, the Congress share plummeted to 283. The Congress majority was precariously narrow. The Swatantra Party emerged as the second largest party in the Lok Sabha with 44 seats, followed by the Jana Sangh with 35, and the Samyukta Socialists and the Communists with 23 each. The situation

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 302. On the one hand it was in true plebiscitary fashion, a la, William Kornhauser, while on the other, Rajni Kothari found in this a new hope for the Congress – Mrs. Gandhi's forcing the Congress to grapple with the changes in the hopes and expectations of the people at the grass-roots level. See William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society*, and Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*.

<sup>53</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Nehrus and the Gandhis*, 160-161.

<sup>54</sup> Myron Weiner, "Party Politics and Electoral Behaviour: From Independence to the 1980s," in Ashutosh Varshney (Ed.), *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics by Myron Weiner* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), 201.

in the states provided a more accurate reflection of the Congress debacle. The Congress party won a clear majority in the legislative assemblies of only seven states, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Mysore. Non-Congress ministries were set up by coalitions in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Kerala, Punjab by the end of March 1967. In April the Congress coalition ministry in U.P. fell and in Rajasthan the Congress-led ministry was so unstable that President's rule had to be imposed.

Top Syndicate leaders like Kamaraj, Atulya Ghosh and S. K. Patil had been defeated in the elections. So the Syndicate's leadership strength in the new parliament was reduced to Sanjiva Reddy and Nijalingappa. Morarji Desai had won his seat, but C. B. Gupta, a rival of Mrs. Gandhi, had lost in U.P. The U.P. results revealed that Mrs. Gandhi's supporters had been elected to the Lok Sabha but several of C. B. Gupta's hand-picked candidates to the state legislature had been defeated.<sup>55</sup>

There seemed to be agreement on one point – that the 1967 election was perceived as an event that marked the “end of an era.”<sup>56</sup> Although the Congress continued to be the single largest party in the

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<sup>55</sup> See Norman D. Palmer, “India's Fourth General Election,” *Asian Survey* (May, 1967) 275-291. Besides Kamaraj, Atulya Ghosh and S.K. Patil, many other ‘tall’ Congress leaders who were cut to size, were the Secretary of the party, T. Manaen; the Union Ministers of Finance (Sachin Chaudhuri); Food (C. Subramaniam), Commerce (Manubhai Shah) Industries (Sanjiviyya), Information (Raj Bahadur), Petroleum (Alagesan), Defence Production (A.M. Thomas) and Works and Housing (M.C. Khanna), the chief ministers of Bihar (K.B. Sahay), Madras (M. Bhaktavatsalam), Punjab (G.S. Musafir) and West Bengal (P.C. Sen). Several state ministers and a number of other stalwarts, including H.C. Mathur, H.C. Heda, R.R. Morarka, Mahavir Tyagi, R.C. Pandey and K.D. Malviya were also defeated.

<sup>56</sup> Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy: 1947-2004: The Gradual Revolution* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 360-361.

country and to enjoy a firm majority at the centre, the demise of 'one party dominant' political system was acknowledged as inevitable. As a consequence there was a popular loss of confidence in Congress leadership which was deep and pervasive. Mr. Kamaraj tried his efforts to rebuild the party by persuading Mrs. Gandhi to invite Morarji Desai to be her deputy. She offered him the finance portfolio. Mrs. Gandhi recognised that though the election of 1967 had shattered the Congress and plunged it into a crisis, it was really the right wing of Congress, at least its older and more conservative leadership that had suffered the most abysmal defeat. It was a different matter though that Mrs. Gandhi was made an easy scapegoat for the failure. But the problems which resulted in electoral discontent, such as drought, devaluation and the cost of the war with Pakistan in 1965, some believed, had either been forced on her or were out of her control.<sup>57</sup>

However the electoral debacle of the Congress strengthened rather than weakened Mrs. Gandhi's position. A party so badly defeated at the polls could hardly afford a renewed struggle for leadership. The Syndicate, which could have made a bid to dislodge Mrs. Gandhi, itself lay broken. The argument for Mrs. Gandhi's re-election as prime minister was strengthened by the feeling that she would be more acceptable than any other Congress leader to the new post-election non-Congress state governments that were being formed

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<sup>57</sup> J. Adams and Phillip Whitehead, *The Dynasty: The Nehru- Gandhi Story* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997), 212.

in areas where the Congress had lost. Moreover most Congress MPs realised that in Mrs. Gandhi they had an effective vote-winner and that without her the outcome would have been much worse. So with most senior Congress leaders voted out and a severely weakened Congress, Mrs. Gandhi became a visible centre of power.

She prepared herself to face the winds of change and accepted Kamaraj's plan for rapprochement with Morarji Desai reluctantly.<sup>58</sup> She compromised for the sake of supposed party unity. As a compromise Desai became Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, not the appointment he desired, but Mrs. Gandhi had held out against his getting the Home Ministry where she believed his rigidity and sectarian approach could have done damage.

Thus after the 1967 general elections Mrs. Gandhi remained at the helm as prime minister, having had to accept Desai as Deputy Prime Minister. Mrs. Gandhi displayed her strength and independence in the composition of the new cabinet. She chose her cabinet without consulting either Desai or Kamaraj. Her supporters and allies were given key posts. Y. V. Chavan (Home), Jagjivan Ram (Food and Agriculture), Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (Industrial Development) and Dinesh Singh (Commerce). It was to be noted that while the Syndicate's favourites were dropped or demoted, some of the new

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<sup>58</sup> According to Zareer Masani, the chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Mysore, who together controlled over half of the votes in the Congress Parliamentary Party, threatened not to support Mrs. Gandhi's candidature unless she appointed Desai as her Deputy. *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975), 174.

ministers were nominees of those chief ministers who had been steadfast in their support for Mrs. Gandhi.<sup>59</sup>

The 1967 elections had been able to fortify Mrs. Gandhi's personal position but for the Congress party the organisational crisis and factionalism had come out in the open. Congress party leaders were confronting a more complex and less manageable political world than that of the Nehru era and the Shastri interregnum when policy issues and factional struggles at the centre and in the states could be settled within the Congress fold.<sup>60</sup> What was to be noted was the way in which a 'one-dominant party' was being transformed into a multi-party since the controlling force of Nehru was no more.

In the 1967 elections Mrs. Gandhi had emerged as the Congress party's principal vote catcher. As has been noted earlier, the Syndicate was rejected by the electorate in their respective states. Mr. S. K. Patil, head of the Bombay party organisation, then serving as Railway Minister, was defeated as was Syndicate member, Atulya Ghosh, who lost his Lok Sabha seat from West Bengal. Mr. Kamaraj, hitherto considered invulnerable, was defeated in his hometown, Madras Constituency.<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Gandhi took on the Syndicate after this, pronouncedly on ideological grounds, even though the roots of the dissensions also lay undeniably in temperamental and personal differences and the generation gap that separated her from the old

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<sup>59</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 106. Also Durga Das, *India from Curzon to Nehru and After* (London: St. James Place, 1969), 405-406. Also R. A. Sharma, *Indira Gandhi and Congress Party* (New Delhi: Northern Book Center, 1988), 47.

<sup>60</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, 201.

<sup>61</sup> Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 354.



guards. The Syndicate's irritation increased in the face of Mrs. Gandhi's assertion of authority in the party and official decision-making. Her tilt towards the left was becoming more pronounced and she often turned towards them for help. Members of the Congress Forum for Socialist Action, Mr. K. D. Malaviya and Mohan Dharia did extend support to Mrs. Gandhi in her efforts to get radical reforms under way.<sup>62</sup> In addition, various agrarian reforms begun in the 1960s under the "Green Revolution" had started to pay off. Mrs. Gandhi made it a key government priority and along with new hybrid seeds, initiated state subsidies, provision of electrical power, water, fertilisers and credit to farmers. India was soon to become self-sufficient in food. There was a marked improvement in the production of good grains from 74 to 95 million tones.<sup>63</sup> Asoka Mehta wrote that credit had to be given to Mrs. Gandhi's bold moves during the period.<sup>64</sup>

On the political front, Mrs. Gandhi declined to accept the easy way out of renominating Dr. Radhakrishnan for presidentship of the Republic – a course favoured by Kamaraj. Instead, she sponsored the candidature of Vice-President, Dr. Zakir Hussain, who was elected with a comfortable majority. Mrs. Gandhi wrote, "A challenge emerged on the occasion of the elections of the Union President and the Vice-President. When Dr. Zakir Hussain was selected as our

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 398. Also see Michelguglielmo Torri, "Factional Politics and Economic Policy: The Case of India's Bank Nationalisation," in *Asian Survey* (December, 1975), 1077-1096. Torri believed that the 1967 electoral debacle had convinced Mrs. Gandhi, who during her first term as Prime Minister had pursued a merely technocratic approach to the problems of the day, of the need for the party to take a leftist turn. It was largely at her insistence that Congress Working Committee adopted a new radical Ten-Point Programme.

<sup>63</sup> Asoka Mehta, *A Decade of Indian Politics*, 37.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Also Pran Chopra, *Uncertain India: A Political Profile of Two Decades of Freedom* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1968), 342-343.

candidate, a lot of our people did not like the idea of a Muslim becoming President. It was the first time. But when I stuck to it, they supported me on it. Then they said that he was a bad choice not because he was a Muslim but because he wouldn't win. That was the excuse. So I said: "Let's lose but we should still try." And of course, he won."<sup>65</sup> This was widely regarded as a triumph of both Indian secularism and Mrs. Gandhi. She also made a bid to reorganise the Congress in those states she perceived to be in need of immediate attention, for example the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee, but was rebuffed by the Congress President Kamaraj. With the loss of Congress hegemony, the power equation between the centre and the states naturally changed. Now centre-state relations revolved more around negotiations and less through intra-party decisions. With her posture of friendliness and charm, Mrs. Gandhi initially enjoyed some advantage. She also displayed genuine interest and sympathy towards the aspirations of the tribal people particularly of the North-East. The ambition of the hill people of Assam to have a state of their own was fulfilled with the formation of Meghalaya. Later came Arunachal and more cordial relations with the Nagas.

Though the 1967 elections had drastically changed the balance of power inside the Congress, the Syndicate continued to be stressful for Mrs. Gandhi. Internal factionalism and one-upmanship revealed a power struggle between senior Syndicate members and "radicals"

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<sup>65</sup> Indira Gandhi, *My Truth*, 117.

identified as those being close to Mrs. Gandhi. The arena of conflict primarily or initially centered on certain economic issues – namely nationalisation of banks and abolition of privy purses of princes. In the wake of the Congress debacle what came to the forefront was an analysis of such poor performance; that is non-implementation of radical economic reforms meant for the welfare of the people. The issue of bank nationalisation was a response to a “new agrarianism” triggered by the Green Revolution of the late 1960s. It had transformed Indian agriculture by setting in motion effective peasant movements capable of exerting a major influence on government policy and the key issues were identified as land reform, compulsory procurement of food grains and taxation of agricultural production and income, commodity and input prices. Hence agrarian producers became a demand group.

Mrs. Gandhi believed that the banks, as bastions of India’s largest business houses, were not sufficiently responsive to investment priorities of government’s development policies. Particularly neglected were the credit needs of poor farmers. Bank nationalisation was justified mainly as a means to provide credit to those considered unworthy by private banking standards. Such credit would help to extend the benefits of the Green Revolution to all and probably ensure a more egalitarian distribution of resources.

Abolition of privy purses was a more visible economic issue that was not meant to affect the quality of lives of large masses of people in the manner that bank nationalisation would. It was more window-

dressing populism. Hence these two highly visible and highly emotive economic issues took centre stage in the immediate post-1967 political scene. For, these would be the two issues which would generate much strain and insecurity to Mrs. Gandhi's tenure throughout 1968 and 1969. These would also lead to volatile confrontations ultimately causing the momentous split of the Congress Party in November 1969. As Kuldip Nayar, the eminent Indian journalist was to write, "Mrs. Gandhi felt cribbed, crabbed and confined. Though after the debacle of many of the elders in the elections she was in a stronger position, it was not easy to resist the pressure of the old guards. She sensed that there would be an open clash one day. The elders controlled the party, but she held the reins of government. And it was in the Prime Minister's office that she began preparing for what lay ahead."<sup>66</sup> In the opinion of Sudipta Kaviraj, well-known Indian political scientist, "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 of her own success."<sup>67</sup> Kaviraj believed that it was after this that Mrs. Gandhi got the first opportunity for a political restructuring that would culminate in the split of 1969.

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<sup>66</sup> Kuldip Nayar, *India after Nehru* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1975), 93.

<sup>67</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics," 1699.

## THE SPLIT OF 1969

The purpose of this section is to analyse how the split was responsible for enabling Mrs. Gandhi to emerge as a leader in her own right, notwithstanding the critical implications it had for the Congress Party. The split of 1969 was an event that had far-reaching consequences for the entire political process in India. The significance of the split for the Indian political system stemmed from the salience of the 'one dominant party' system for the political process – a system in which a broad based and inclusive “party of consensus,” that is, the Congress, which had occupied the dominant, central position, with a multiplicity of electorally ineffectual opposition parties on the margins.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Congress had already suffered a two-way erosion of electoral support to more militant parties both to its right and left, presaging the politics of confrontation between the two extremes.<sup>68</sup> This led to misgivings and speculations regarding the destabilising consequences of the impending Congress split, as Congress-centred dominant party-system was widely regarded as a major explanation for the continuance of competitive politics in India.<sup>69</sup> The split itself was a multi-layered phenomenon which had been variously interpreted as intra-party struggle for power or as struggle over ideology and policy.<sup>70</sup> The split was subsequently

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<sup>68</sup> Rajni Kothari, “The Politics of Confrontation” in *The Times of India*, New Delhi, June 29-30, 1970.

<sup>69</sup> Mahendra Prasad Singh, *Split in a Predominant Party: The Indian National Congress in 1969* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981), 72.

<sup>70</sup> Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 390.

justified solely as an ideological conflict between those with a vested interest in the status quo and those committed to social change.<sup>71</sup>

In whatever terms, one may wish to describe the split, it is clear that it was the culmination of successive confrontations whose immediate roots could be traced to the outcome of the 1967 general elections. As Mrs. Gandhi herself would note, “Nevertheless, after the 1967 election, there was definite split in the party. It was not obvious to all but it was obvious to us, to everybody here, because every time we had a meeting of the Executive of the Parliamentary Party they would deliberately try to – I won’t say insult, although it was pretty near – but needle me on any small point and make it as unpleasant as possible. Mr. Patil was openly saying that we should have a coalition government. We asked him with whom. He said Jana Sangh and Swatantra. Two parties whose policies, foreign and domestic, had always been diametrically opposed to the Congress’s since the very beginning. So this difference was there and it was growing.”<sup>72</sup>

It has already been indicated in the previous section that as it became increasingly evident that the Congress debacle was mainly because of the failures of senior Syndicate members, Mrs. Gandhi’s position became the centre of conflict. This conflict between Mrs. Gandhi and the Syndicate, which had surfaced immediately after the 1967 elections, was prompted by fears among party leaders that they were fast losing their former position of influence cultivated under the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Indira Gandhi, *My Truth*, 118.

principle of collective leadership during the Shastri years. The electoral debacle experienced by the party had critically weakened the prestige of the organisational wing. The election of Mrs. Gandhi as leader and as prime minister was mainly due to the support of chief ministers of those states where Congress had been returned to power. Most Congress MPs preferred Mrs. Gandhi as leader for they believed that her national image, her reputation for flexibility and acceptability to minorities were decisive qualifications for leadership at a time when both party unity and national integration could depend on the central government's overall credibility in its dealings with disparate state coalitions.<sup>73</sup> This proved to be the chief source of insecurity for the Syndicate. Mrs. Gandhi's growing independence from party guidance was reflected in her announcement of the new ministry. The Syndicate's policy of keeping a check on Mrs. Gandhi by making Morarji Desai Deputy Prime Minister, would finally lead to a flashpoint. It was evident that Desai acted as a spokesman for the Syndicate in conflicts over questions of policy. This stand-off between Mrs. Gandhi and the Syndicate constituted the most crucial dimension of the split.

The process of confrontation that threatened Congress unity spanned domestic economic and political issues. Major factors that could explain the election losses in the 1967 elections were sought to

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Brecher, *Political Leadership in India*, 71-94.

be identified.<sup>74</sup> One major factor that emerged from the analysis was the gap between Congress policies and their implementation in economic matters and it was felt urgently necessary to fulfill past pledges and promises. Other factors ranged from “peoples’ anger”, “rank indiscipline in the Congress organisation,” “rising prices,” “devaluation” to “Congress’s failure to build in the country an instrument of social and economic change.” The analysis also noted “a demand for a change of leadership” and that “young blood should be inducted in positions of power and policy-making.”<sup>75</sup>

The Congress Working Committee, while trying to grope for the exact causes and cures for the party’s decline, felt the need for some symbolic action to reiterate the commitment of the party to the implementation of Congress programmes. The first step in this direction was taken by senior Syndicate member Atulya Ghosh in May 1967 when he proposed a new initiative in a note declaring that the privileges of princes were inconsistent with the practice of democracy.<sup>76</sup> Subsequently, this proposal was incorporated in a “Resolution for Implementation of Congress Programmes.” This resolution adopted and approved a more comprehensive charter called the “Ten-Point Programme” to accelerate the attainment of a socialist society.<sup>77</sup> This programme, apart from the proposal to remove

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<sup>74</sup> A.M. Zaidi and S.G. Zaidi, (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress, Vol. 19* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company Ltd., 1983), 323-334. An analysis of the Fourth General Elections was done at an AICC meeting on June 23, 1967. Ibid, 321.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Participants in the discussion at the AICC meeting on June 23, 1967 were mainly S.N. Mishra (Bihar), K. Pande (Bihar), Mohan Dharia (Maharashtra), S.K. Patil, H.N. Bahuguna, B.R. Bhagat and Moraji Desai.

<sup>76</sup> *Congress Bulletin*, (April-May 1967), 37.

<sup>77</sup> A.M. Zaidi and S.G. Zaidi, (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress Vol.19*, 351-353.



privileges enjoyed by ex-rulers, embodied long-standing policies of the Congress party such as taking steps to implement social control of banks, nationalisation of general insurance, organisation of consumer cooperatives in urban and rural areas, limitations on urban income and property, implementation of the Monopolies Commission, provision of minimum needs to the entire community, formulation of a national policy of public distribution of food grains to the vulnerable sections of society and improved implementation of land reforms. At the AICC meeting in New Delhi, on June 23, 1967, the resolution generated much ideological debate and discussions among younger radicals and senior party leaders. It appeared that the polarization revealed by the last elections, was now reflected inside the Congress Parliamentary Party. The radicals led by K. D. Malaviya and Mohan Dharia were scathingly critical of the Working Committee's ambiguity about the proposed socialist measures.<sup>78</sup> They were able to introduce an amendment of the resolution demanding abolition of privy purses as well as privileges of former princely rulers, and the Ten-Point Programme was adopted by unanimous vote of the AICC. The disaffections within the top leadership of the party were reflected in the reactions to the resolution. Kamaraj was supposed to have remained silent, though it was generally known that he favoured the resolution, as he endorsed all radical demands. Atulya Ghosh and Y. B. Chavan were both pleased and indicated that they had no objection to the resolution. S. K. Patil was furious and described the move as

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<sup>78</sup> Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 390.

“stark madness.” Morarji Desai repudiated it as a breach of faith with the princes. Mrs. Gandhi expressed concern only at the manner in which the resolution was passed.<sup>79</sup>

Over the next couple of months, the two issues that took centre stage inside Congress politics were bank nationalisation and the abolition of privy purses. These would dominate not only the AICC session of Jabalpur in October 1967, but also chart out the course of conflict between the Young Turks and older leadership of Congress till the Bangalore session of July 1969. The impatience of the younger radicals was apparent at the Jabalpur session, when they insisted on immediate action to implement the Ten-Point Programme. Initially, the Prime Minister did not back either side as she attempted to keep the party united.<sup>80</sup> Urging that nothing should be done to jeopardize Congress unity, Mrs. Gandhi extended her support to Morarji Desai and was followed by Kamaraj, Y. V. Chavan and Jagjivan Ram. Over the next two years, that is, 1968 and 1969 the party remained sharply divided on matters of economic policy which would gradually take the form of a political stand-off at the end of 1969. The 1968 AICC session at Hyderabad had revealed a balance of power between the followers of the Syndicate on the one hand and those identified with the Prime Minister, that is the members of Congress Forum for Socialist Action and some state chief ministers, notably, D. P. Mishra. It was during this time that Mrs. Gandhi, started seeking advice and relying on

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<sup>79</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi; A Personal and Political Biography*, 111

<sup>80</sup> A.M.Zaidi and S.G. Zaidi (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol.19, 362-376.

trusted personal advisors, chiefly P. N. Haksar, a career civil servant but also known to be a dedicated socialist. There were growing allegations of Mrs. Gandhi selling India to the Russians.<sup>81</sup> The process of internal polarisation in the Congress had been accelerated at the Faridabad session of the AICC in April 1969. The Syndicate prepared for a direct confrontation with Mrs. Gandhi when the Congress President S. Nijalingappa challenged the latter's authority in the key area of government's economic policy. The crux of the policy disagreement paralleled the ongoing ideological debate between the senior conservative leadership and the younger radicals and this paved the way for an alliance between Mrs. Gandhi and the radicals. The heat was growing and Mrs. Gandhi sensed that the Syndicate was determined to remove her from office. She examined the possibility of mobilising counter support through an alliance with the left in a bid towards transforming the power struggle into an ideological battle.<sup>82</sup>

The death of President Dr. Zakir Hussain in May 1969 became the occasion for a test of strength between the two groups as they manoeuvred to select the new Congress candidate for the presidential election. A final decision was left for a meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Board scheduled to coincide with the special AICC session called at Bangalore in July 1969. It would be this issue of national presidency that would bring her to the cross-roads of her political career and the Congress party to a critical juncture of its

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<sup>81</sup> The charge was levelled by Morarji Desai in an interview to Francine Frankel, a renowned political scientist on August 2, 1973. See Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy: 1947-2004*, 401.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vaisili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive-II: The KGB and The World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 318.

political existence. Ostensibly the Bangalore session was meant to be dominated by the sharp controversy over the Congress party's economic programme, but the choice of a Congress candidate for the office of the President came to the fore.<sup>83</sup> It was almost certain that the Congress Parliamentary Board would take a formal and final decision on the party's choice of a candidate for the office of the President of India. The Syndicate proposed to sponsor the name of Mr. Sanjeeva Reddy, and would make every effort to settle the issue at the meeting. Mrs. Gandhi seemed to have been convinced that the Syndicate, in an effort to reassert its authority, was mounting a conspiracy to engineer her downfall by making Reddy as Congress President. Facing desertion from her ranks should the Syndicate reestablish its dominance and suspecting that Mr. Reddy might then call upon Mr. Desai to form the central ministry, Mrs. Gandhi set about preparing the defeat of Mr. Reddy.<sup>84</sup> She appeared to have made her first major move to create distance between her and the party leadership through ideological polarisation of the party members. She placed before the Congress Working Committee what she described as "stray thoughts," but which was in effect a comprehensive economic policy paper largely modelled after the programmes of the leftists in the party. It proposed (1) a ceiling on unproductive expenditure (2) nationalisation of banks (3) special efforts to develop backward areas (4) appointment of a Monopolies Commission (5) greater autonomy for public sector

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<sup>83</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 12, 1969.

<sup>84</sup> T.V. Kunhi Krishnan, *Chavan and the Troubled Decade* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications, 1971), 303.

undertakings (6) building of a corp of professionals to manage the public sector (7) reservation of most consumer industries for the small scale sector (8) the exclusion of foreign capital from fields in which Indian technological knowhow was available (9) special assistance to rural cooperatives (10) ceiling on incomes and on urban property (11) nationalisation of the import of raw materials (12) special rural programmes (13) agrarian land reforms and (14) a minimum wage for agricultural labour.<sup>85</sup> Mrs. Gandhi's "stray thoughts" were significant in that they constituted the first public declaration of her affiliation with the leftists within the Congress. As Masani commented, that for the first time in her career, Mrs. Gandhi had staked her political future on an ideological issue.<sup>86</sup> Despite reservations the "stray thoughts" were adopted as a statement of economic policy of the Congress Party. Mrs. Gandhi's aim had been to rally the Young Turks behind her and split the Kamaraj -Desai axis.

Next, she tried to counter the Syndicate's choice of Mr. Reddy as successor to Late Dr. Zakir Hussain. Mrs. Gandhi had earlier shown her preference for the Vice-President Mr. V. V. Giri for elevation to the highest office.<sup>87</sup> It seemed that both sides were preparing for a showdown. The Congress Parliamentary Board decided on July 12, 1969 at its meeting in Bangalore, by four votes to two, to nominate the Speaker of Lok Sabha, N. Sanjeeva Reddy as the party candidate for

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<sup>85</sup> Zareer Masani, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography*, 197-198.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

<sup>87</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 9, 1969.

the office of the President.<sup>88</sup> Details of the voting were not available, but apparently Morarji Desai, Y. V. Chavan, Kamaraj and S. K. Patil voted for Sanjeeva Reddy, while Mrs. Gandhi and Fakruddin Ali Ahmed voted for the other proposed candidate, the Food and Agriculture Minister, Mr. Jagjivan Ram. Mr. Nijalingappa and Mr. Ram did not vote, but the former's preferences for N. Sanjeeva Reddy was well known.<sup>89</sup>

A new dimension to the presidential election nonetheless was added when the Vice-President, Mr. V. V. Giri announced his candidature as an independent for the top post.<sup>90</sup> The Press had reported that it put the presidency, so far considered a close preserve of the Congress, in a veil of uncertainty. Mr. Giri's unexpected decision appeared to have taken both the Congress and the opposition by surprise.<sup>91</sup> Mrs. Gandhi's stand on the issue of the choice of the presidential candidate vis-à-vis the Syndicate indicated that more than a clash of personalities was involved in the tussle between her and the latter. By insisting that she should have a say in the choice of the party candidate for the presidency, Mrs. Gandhi was only asserting the primacy of the office of the Prime Minister.<sup>92</sup> The key issue was whether or not it was vital for the party to maintain the position that the Prime Minister's office was the base on which the

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<sup>88</sup> A.M. Zaidi and S.G. Zaidi (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. 20, 369.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Not reconciled to the Board's verdict, Mrs. Gandhi was understood to have warned the Board that it might have to face serious consequences, if it did not revoke its decisions. Her remarks were interpreted in AICC circles to mean that the issue of the presidential elections might trigger off a fresh crisis in the party. Also *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 13, 1969. *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 13, 1969.

<sup>90</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 14, 1969. *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 14, 1969.

<sup>91</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 14, 1969.

<sup>92</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 10, 1969.

entire constitutional edifice rested. Any move that weakened the standing of the Prime Minister could only add to the political instability which the country could ill-afford.

The Congress Parliamentary Board confirmed Mr. N. Sanjeeva Reddy's candidature despite Mrs. Gandhi's objection. She was outraged. Tariq Ali wrote, "She now threw caution to the winds and took them by surprise in a series of well-executed moves."<sup>93</sup> Mrs. Gandhi retaliated first by stripping Morarji Desai of the finance portfolio, although a cabinet reshuffle was the subject of speculation, as one of the avenues open to the Prime Minister.<sup>94</sup> Most political observers were left a little breathless by Mrs. Gandhi's action and she was criticised for her decision to relieve Mr. Desai of his finance portfolio.<sup>95</sup> In its editorial, *The Statesman*, while acknowledging the constitutional right of the Prime Minister to reshuffle the union cabinet or the portfolio of individual ministers, maintained that Mr. Desai's removal could not be put in the category of legitimate exercise of the Prime Minister's prerogative. The editorial went on to add that the real issue was the non-acceptance of the party's candidate for presidency by Mrs. Gandhi. Her stand that she alone could decide the party's choice was untenable. Rebuffed in her attempts to make the question of her primacy appear as a vital issue of principle or policy, Mrs. Gandhi had precipitated a crisis in the party and government.<sup>96</sup> Atulya Ghosh, a senior member of the Syndicate had written, "I can

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<sup>93</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Nehrus and The Gandhis*, 166.

<sup>94</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 17, 1969. *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 17, 1969.

<sup>95</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 17, 1969.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid* and also *The Times of India*, July 17, 1969

appreciate the distress and annoyance of the Prime Minister about the selection of the presidential nominee, but to mix up the issue with socio-economic policies was indeed confusing.<sup>97</sup> It appeared that Mrs. Gandhi's pride had been slighted and she would take steps to salvage her prestige and status in the party.<sup>98</sup> Dismissing Desai was the first step. Less than forty-eight hours before the Lok Sabha was scheduled to meet for the monsoon session on July 21, 1969 the government announced that fourteen of the largest banks in India (accounting for 56 percent of total deposits and over 52 percent of total credit in the economy) was nationalised by presidential ordinance.<sup>99</sup> This was her second step. It was clear that by issuing an ordinance to nationalise banks, Mrs. Gandhi succeeded in partly deflecting the flood of criticism on her dismissal of Mr. Desai.<sup>100</sup> Mrs. Gandhi's assertion that her differences with the Syndicate had all along centered on issues of social change gained credibility from the amazing rapidity with which bank nationalisation was made possible once Desai's tenure as finance minister came to an end. The decision to carry out bank nationalisation by an ordinance with immediate effect seemed to have had a distinct political advantage, for it identified a conspicuously "progressive" measure exclusively with the Prime Minister.<sup>101</sup> Mrs. Gandhi for the time being had been able to seize the initiative in her favour. Bank nationalisation was a measure that had

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<sup>97</sup> Atulya Ghosh, *The Split: The Indian National Congress* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1980), 32.

<sup>98</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*, 316-317.

<sup>99</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 22, 1969.

<sup>100</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 21, 1969.

<sup>101</sup> Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy: 1947-2004*, 420.



been favoured by many other senior leaders too. A dramatic change in the climate of opinion in favour of Mrs. Gandhi, after the nationalisation of banks, was evident at the Congress Parliamentary Party Executive Committee meeting.<sup>102</sup> She was congratulated on her “bold and courageous” action. Some members even gave her a standing ovation. This was something which had not happened before in the party executive where Mrs. Gandhi had often been subjected to severe criticism.

The Syndicate’s reaction to the nationalisation issue revealed that Kamaraj and Atulya Ghosh, old advocates of the issue, expressed satisfaction. Atulya Ghosh explained at length that nationalisation of banks was not a new measure of the government as it was being made out in 1969.<sup>103</sup> In fact as far back as 1955, he pointed out, the Imperial Bank was nationalized and the State Bank was created. The need for nationalising commercial banks was felt because the government wanted to follow a production-oriented investment policy. Mr. Ghosh added that the term “nationalisation” was used in political parlance, but the country could only benefit if through such a measure, the investment policy laid down by the government was scrupulously followed. The issue as to whether the investment policy could be implemented effectively or not was open to examination, but Ghosh had apparently failed to understand how the party organisation could be held responsible for non-implementation of the

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<sup>102</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 21, 1969.

<sup>103</sup> Atulya Ghosh, *The Split: The Indian National Congress*, 33.

same policy. He thus rubbished the bogey of "reactionary conservatism" that was being raised against most of the Syndicate members.

S. K. Patil and S. Nijalingappa were strong opponents of the policy in the past too. Y. V. Chavan, regarded as the Syndicate's ally, hailed the measure as a "historic step" towards socialism. The Young Turks and Congress left-wingers, like K. D. Malaviya were jubilant. The reaction of so-called "Ginger Group" leaders (S. N. Mishra, Mrs. Tarakeswari Sinha) was one of guarded satisfaction.<sup>104</sup>

The reaction of the opposition parties to the bank nationalisation was predictable.<sup>105</sup> The right wing Jana Sangh and Swatantra Party expressed opposition to the measure. The leftist groups such as the CPI, CPI (M), Samyukta Socialist Party, the Praja Socialist Party and the left leaning populist DMK of Tamil Nadu supported it. The Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) and the Akali Dal, two other right-wing parties relying on the support of the Jat farmers and peasants in Western Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, supported the decision to nationalise banks. It were these parties that had sought to articulate the benefits of the Green Revolution in terms of easy availability of rural credit for farmers through bank nationalisation. Mrs. Gandhi was thus able to wean away these parties in her support. As far as the major interest groups were concerned, business and industrial circles expressed concern at the "crippling effect" of recent

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<sup>104</sup> A.M.Zaidi and S.G.Zaidi (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. 21, 529-530.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 530. *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 26, 1969.

government decisions on the economy. Trade unions, like the INTUC, welcomed the measure. It proved to be popular with the mass public. The fact that Mrs. Gandhi was the personal embodiment of a new direction in economic policy meant to benefit the poor and underprivileged was demonstrated through large rallies in New Delhi. Later when she undertook country-wide tours to mobilise support she was greeted by big crowds wherever she went. Mrs. Gandhi had been able to project a “pro-poor” image and this enabled her to win an immediate tactical victory in her struggle with the Syndicate.

Mrs. Gandhi had been able to achieve a decisive victory over the Syndicate by successfully catapulting the nationalisation issue to the political centre stage. Here was an issue that had been in the pipeline since 1955 and at a time when the government’s policy needed direction, Mrs. Gandhi had asserted her authority by setting the tone and tempo of the party’s policies. She used the occasion to connect with the people directly.<sup>106</sup> She said, “When banks were nationalised, some rumours were afloat that this step was directed against a particular section of our society. I want to make it perfectly clear that we do not propose to do anything against anybody. We want all of us to march forward together..... that whatever steps we are taking are at the behest of the masses and in the interest of our democracy.” Addressing rallies that daily gathered before her residence, Mrs. Gandhi pointed out the hypocrisy of Congressmen who for years had

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<sup>106</sup> *Selected Speeches and Writings of Indira Gandhi, January 1966-August 1969: The Years of Challenge* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971), 60.

voted for socialist programmes and were labelling her a dictator for her stand on pro-poor policy implementation.<sup>107</sup> She was accused of being a communist. Intervening in a debate in the Rajya Sabha on the bill to nationalise fourteen major commercial banks which had already been adopted by the Lok Sabha, Mrs. Gandhi remarked, "Some honourable members here and many people outside have raised the bogey of communism. It is strange to see that Macarthyism which is long dead in the place of its birth should have now found a foothold across the seas and continents in India. It shows that those who propound this theory show an astounding ignorance of the political forces at work in our country and of facts of life in the India of 1969."<sup>108</sup> She took these charges against her to the people who reacted with popular outpourings of enthusiasm for her policies.

Despite Congress's failure in the economic development front in the early 1960s, people generally looked upon the Congress as unavoidable, or at least during Nehru's time people had faith that the leaders were sincerely trying to do something. But after Nehru there was a big credibility gap between the Congress government and the governed. To many Mrs. Gandhi appeared to be the only person who could bridge that credibility gap. Mrs. Gandhi too claimed that the bank nationalisation had brought about a tremendous psychological change in the country and the people had a feeling that they had got

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<sup>107</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 5, 1969.

<sup>108</sup> *Selected Speeches and Writings of Indira Gandhi, January 1966-August 1969*, 134. Also, *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 8, 1969. Mrs. Gandhi's obvious reference was to her own party members, like Asoka Mehta and some Swatantra and Jana Sangh leaders who had accused her of allying herself with the Communists and seeking their political support.

out of the rut and things had started moving.<sup>109</sup> Bank nationalisation was projected as proof of Mrs. Gandhi's commitment to the common man against moneyed interests. The strain of stridency that subsequently characterised Indian politics at the national level could be traced to this period. As Kuldip Nayar wrote, "A new insidious kind of campaign to judge people's commitment started those days..... Everywhere, more so in Mrs. Gandhi's camp, the question asked often.... was 'what is your commitment?' What was vaguely meant was that those who were with Mrs. Gandhi were 'progressive, pure and purposeful' and those who were on the other side were "rightists, reactionaries, and retrograde."<sup>110</sup>

An interesting dimension of the internal strife that rocked Congress party was the manner the press in London reported events.<sup>111</sup> *The Financial Times* said that it was unlikely that the Congress would recover completely from it. Even if the party did reunite itself under Mrs. Gandhi or some other leader, its loss of prestige could well prove to be permanent. India was very near to the end of the post-independence period in which a single political movement had been able to exercise ascendancy over a vast and disparate country. *The Times* said the consequences of the open antagonism between Mrs. Gandhi and Mr. Morarji Desai would be momentous. Mrs. Gandhi, it said, had the position of being able to balance the warring personalities and factions in the party which had

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<sup>109</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 8, 1969.

<sup>110</sup> Kuldip Nayar, *India: The Critical Years* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1973), 51.

<sup>111</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 18, 1969.

muddled its way to the conclusion that her leadership had become too high a price for unity. It felt that even with some semblance of unity, the party seemed likely in 1972 to lose its majority at the centre for the first time since it won power in India. Defeat at the polls seemed assured. Under the heading, "Mrs. Gandhi hits back hard," *The Guardian* commented that the Prime Minister had often been accused of indecision. She seemed to have acted drastically. If the Congress disintegrated India would have no other party of equivalent national standing. It would mean the end of the period of relative stability that India had enjoyed since Nehru's rule. *The Daily Telegraph* wrote that unfortunately the autocratic ways of Mr. Nehru survived in his daughter. "This seems no way to lead her party."

On the bank nationalisation issue, the *New China News Agency* reported that this was a measure adopted by Mrs. Gandhi "to deceive the people and strike at the Desai faction which opposes this programme so as to maintain her unstable rule."<sup>112</sup> It held that Mrs. Gandhi's programme was essentially one for developing bureaucratic capitalism under the guise of nationalisation.

The Soviet Union was said to have been positive in its reaction to the bank nationalisation issue, for the CPI's support to Mrs. Gandhi was viewed as an indication of encouragement from Moscow. This was also the time when the CPI set out to gain a position of influence within the ruling Congress Party.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 26, 1969.

<sup>113</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vaisili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, 318.

If sacking Desai as Finance Minister was her first step, the second being the nationalisation of banks, Mrs. Gandhi's third step against the Syndicate would prove decisive. She was already smarting under the humiliation of having to endorse the Congress nominee for the presidential elections, N. Sanjeeva Reddy against her wishes, when V. V. Giri, acting President and former Vice President, announced his decision to contest as the opposition candidate backed by the left parties in Parliament, as well as regional parties like Akali Dal, the DMK and the Muslim League.<sup>114</sup> The two conservative parties, Jana Sangh and Swatantra decided to support C. D. Desmukh, a former finance minister as their official nominee. They did so with the knowledge that he had no serious chance of victory. What was significant was their decision to cast second-preference votes for Mr. Reddy. It was the Congress President's discussions with Jana Sangh and Swatantra in the first week of August 1969 on the question of second preference votes for Mr. Reddy, which provided Mrs. Gandhi and her forces with the opportunity they were seeking. Mrs. Gandhi now took two crucial decisions. She refused to call on Congress representatives to vote for Mr. Reddy and simultaneously made the whole question of party discipline irrelevant by calling for a "free vote" determined by the conscience of individual MPs.

The free vote was a superb tactical manoeuvre.<sup>115</sup> It avoided opposing Reddy openly but it totally undermined his support inside

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<sup>114</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, July 25, 1969.

<sup>115</sup> *Congress Bulletin*, (August-September, 1969), 30-31.

the Congress. She realised that the central issue now was her political survival. She denounced the Congress leaders who had approached the right arguing that this had breached an important principle of the Congress that is, secularism.<sup>116</sup>

The battle lines seemed to have been drawn. Mr. N. Sanjeeva Reddy could count on the support of the senior members of the Syndicate, the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra. Mrs. Gandhi's support for V. V. Giri ensured that the principle of a "free vote" represented the best chance of defeating Reddy in the election. Two of her senior ministers had already prepared the ground for a free vote earlier at a meeting at the Prime Minister's residence – they were Fakruddin Ali Ahmed and Jagjivan Ram. The left, the regional groups like Akali Dal, DMK and the Muslim League and members of the Congress Forum for Socialist Action were aligned on the side of Giri. While the Congress President Nijalingappa tried hard to explain his actions as routine and of "usual practice,"<sup>117</sup> the Prime Minister's men were unrelenting in their efforts to extract a statement from the Congress President on his meeting with the same two conservative parties, who had openly demanded the removal of the Prime Minister. The atmosphere of crisis within the Congress Party was aggravated by the intransigence of both groups.<sup>118</sup> Mrs. Gandhi's seeking of the right of a free vote for Congress MPs and MLAs in the presidential elections changed the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Also *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 12, 1969.

<sup>117</sup> Texts of correspondence on the contentious issues in the presidential election between S. Nijalingappa, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Jagjivan Ram and F. A. Ahmed are found in *Congress Bulletin*, (August-September, 1969), 23-38.

<sup>118</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 12, 1969.



complexion of the crisis in the party by bringing a split nearer.<sup>119</sup> That the Congress was in the midst of a crisis of grave magnitude was apparent since the Bangalore session of the AICC in July 1969, where sharp differences between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the party organisers led by the Congress President, Mr. Nijalingappa came out in the open. For sometime however, it seemed that most sections of the party would be able to pull together after their support for bank nationalisation. Things however came to such a pass that confrontation was inevitable.

By August 13, 1969, 200 Congress MPs were reported to have collected including the signatures of those 36 ministers demanding a free vote.<sup>120</sup> Judged against the strength of 438 in Parliament, and the total complement of 51 ministers this seemed as a demonstration of the support Mrs. Gandhi expected to command in the event of a showdown. As the factional conflict spread to the states it became evident that even among the presidential electors in the state Congress legislature parties, where support for Mr. Reddy had so far been secure, chances of cross voting were increasing.<sup>121</sup> An attempt to summarise the patterns of support in the states for Mr. Reddy and Mr. Giri, by categorising the states as “pro-syndicate” “pro-Indira” and “divided,” was made.<sup>122</sup> The states of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Bombay were Syndicate strongholds. Pradesh

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<sup>119</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 13, 1969.

<sup>120</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 14, 1969.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Mahendra Prasad Singh, *Split in a Predominant Party*, 76-80.

Congress units in Jammu Kashmir, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh were strongly “pro-Indira.” In those states where the two factions were equal, were “divided” and in this category came U.P., Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Kerala. See Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**

Patterns of support for Mr. Reddy and Mr. Giri in the states for the presidential election in August 1969.

Pro-Syndicate (For Reddy)	Pro-Indira (For Giri)	Divided
Tamil Nadu Maharashtra Gujarat Karnataka Bombay	Jammu & Kashmir Punjab Himachal Pradesh	Bihar UP West Bengal Orissa Assam Andhra Pradesh Madhya Pradesh Haryana Rajasthan Kerala

Source:

- a. Mahendra Prasad Singh, *Split in a Predominant Party*, 76.
- b. Iqbal Narain, “Democratic Politics and Political Development in India” in *Asian Survey* (February, 1970), 93.

The above categorisation was done on the basis of the ‘pro-whip’ vis-à-vis ‘free vote’ stand taken by the heads of the legislative and organisational wings of the state party.

In the states under the “divided” category Mr. Giri garnered support for his candidature in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala, Orissa, UP and West Bengal, in addition to Tamil Nadu which was traditionally a Syndicate bastion.

The election results that were announced on August 20, 1969 belied the expectations of the Syndicate. Mr. Giri was elected with the support of the Socialist, Communists, DMK, Akali Dal and the Congress rebels. The elections provided an interesting manifestation of the interactions between the factions within the ruling Congress party and the opposition parties as well as the impact of exclusively regional and state parties on national politics. Almost all breakaway “Congress” parties in various states formed in the recent past by dissident Congressmen—Bangla Congress (West Bengal), BKD (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra), Kerala Congress (Kerala), Jana Congress (Orissa), Loktantrik Congress Dal (Bihar) and Janata Paksha (Karnataka) joined the pro-Indira Congress rebels in supporting Giri.<sup>123</sup>

The results revealed that Mr. Giri obtained a lead over Mr. Reddy in the first count but failed to get an absolute majority of the valid votes polled. The cross-voting in the Congress (40 percent at the centre and 20 percent in the states) coupled with the second preference votes of the PSP and the BKD defectors decisively swung the balance in favour of Mr. Giri.<sup>124</sup> If one were to analyse Mr. Giri’s

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>124</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 21, 1969.

success, then it was evident that a combination of political forces represented by the leftist and regional opposition parties, the pro-Indira “conscience voters” in the Congress and some dissident Congress defectors, who were waiting to come back to the Congress mainstream when the factional balance of forces changed in their favour. In the first count the overwhelming vote Giri received in the non-Congress states of Tamil Nadu (ruled by the DMK), West Bengal and Kerala (under Communist- domination governing coalition) and Punjab (under the Akali Dal-Jana Sangh governing coalitions) laid the foundation for his majority.<sup>125</sup>

This presidential election brought to the fore two points of far reaching significance. One, that the intervention of various all-India parties in support of factions within the Congress party could determine a crucial outcome and second, that purely regional or state parties like DMK, Akali Dal and BKD could decisively intervene in national politics as well. It also indicated the culmination of a process in which the states and their leaders started taking a genuine initiative in national politics since the time of Mrs. Gandhi’s election as Prime Minister in 1966. The defeat of Mr. Reddy could be seen as evidence of the diminishing influence of the organisational wing of the Congress party and a qualitative shift in the distribution of power between the centre and the states. Most importantly the results of the

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<sup>125</sup> Mahendra Prasad Singh, *Split in a Predominant Party*, 80.

presidential elections proved to be a test for Mrs. Gandhi's leadership as well as for the Syndicate.<sup>126</sup>

As Rajini Kothari pointed out, this struggle for leadership did three things.<sup>127</sup> First, it brought out in the open an issue that had been suppressed throughout the operation of the Kamaraj Plan, that is, the status and position of the prime minister and her government in the Congress party's equation of power. Second, that intra-party conflict had led to mobilization of support from outside the party. While Mrs. Gandhi mobilized the left parties, who had already pledged to support her in a contingency and the DMK and other regional groups, the organisational leaders found support from the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra. Third, the polarisation that followed took on a regional character, with northern India, West Bengal, Kerala and Madras going with Mrs. Gandhi and western India, Rajasthan and Mysore supporting the Syndicate. All this upset the Congress consensus and erased the boundaries of left and right that had preserved the identity of the Congress centre and gave rise to a new phase of competitive alignments.

By ensuring Mr. Giri's victory, it seemed Mrs. Gandhi would be able to re-establish the supremacy of the governmental leadership vis-à-vis party managers, as also to re-establish a left of center consensus under Congress dominance. It was apprehended at the same time that Mr. Giri's victory was likely to mark the beginning of a more troubled

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<sup>126</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 21, 1969.

<sup>127</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*, 316.

phase in the current political crisis.<sup>128</sup> It was likely that she would come under strong pressure from sections of the Congress party as well as the opposition, to treat Mr. Reddy's defeat as rejection of the official Congress candidate. This would be tantamount to an expression of the country's lack of confidence in Mrs. Gandhi as the party's leader in Parliament. Given the nature of polarisation of forces that took place in the run-up to the presidential election, a split had seemed inevitable even if Mr. Reddy had won. But after Mr. Giri's victory, Mrs. Gandhi may have had a better chance of reshaping the party according to her wishes and securing its support for the continuance of her leadership and the policies she formulated.<sup>129</sup>

The autumn of 1969 witnessed two parallel activities that marked the beginning of the decisive and inevitable round culminating in the split in November 1969. They were (a) pressure tactics by rival factions with the Syndicate insisting on disciplinary action against party deviants in the presidential election and the Prime Minister's faction defending its right to conscience voting, given the extraordinary situation surrounding the election and (b) unity attempts by intermediaries, mainly by Mr. Y. V. Chavan.

The defeat of N. Sanjeeva Reddy brought to the fore the whole question of discipline in the party. Mrs. Gandhi had expressed her inability to issue a whip as suggested by the Congress President.<sup>130</sup> After this Nijalingappa and many other party leaders, supporting

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<sup>128</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 21, 1969.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 14, 1969.

Reddy, were reconciled to cross-voting by the Prime Minister's supporters both at the Centre and the states.<sup>131</sup> While Mr. Nijalingappa was determined to seek explanations from Mrs. Gandhi, Jagjivan Ram and Fakruddin Ali Ahmed for their conduct in working against the official Congress candidate, Mrs. Gandhi warned of disastrous consequences for the Congress if disciplinary action was taken against party members at the centre or at the states.<sup>132</sup> The Congress Working Committee scheduled to meet for the first time after the presidential election on August 25, 1969 was expected to take a final decision on whether to pursue the disciplinary processes or not. The committee however dropped action for indiscipline against Mrs. Gandhi and her colleagues, primarily at the behest of Y. V. Chavan who pleaded that the situation be approached "in a spirit of give and take and see that nothing was done that would impair the unity of the party."<sup>133</sup> It was reported that there was country-wide relief at the CWC decision since a split had been averted.<sup>134</sup> In an editorial, *The Times of India* hailed the decision of the Congress Working Committee as "realistic".<sup>135</sup> It commented that the Congress Working Committee resolution had placed the issue of discipline in the correct perspective by insisting that party discipline could be built up only on the basis of

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, August 19, 1969.

<sup>133</sup> A.M. Zaidi and S.A. Zaidi, (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. 20. 434-435.

<sup>134</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 26, 1969.

<sup>135</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, August 27, 1969.

strict adherence to the party's policies and the maintenance of internal democracy involving party organs at various levels.<sup>136</sup>

While the Congress Working Committee resolution of August 25, 1969 merely papered over a deep sense of hostility between the two factions, it was able to avert a split in the Congress. Buoyed by the decisive verdict in her favour in the Congress Working Committee in the wake of the presidential election, Mrs. Gandhi appeared to be anxious to enlist the support of as many key party organs as possible for her radical economic programmes. In early September 1969 the Prime Minister began an intensive tour of different states of the north, east and south India, with the obvious intention of mobilising grass-roots support in the party and the country in her favour. She had consciously embarked on a path of direct communication with people of all states and to explain to them her position and vision of economic reforms for which faced virulent criticism from one section of the Congress party. She feared that reactionary forces which had been subdued in the past few weeks, were reorganising for a "fresh attack" on her policies.<sup>137</sup> In a series of public meetings Mrs. Gandhi reiterated her commitment to socialism. She reasoned that she stood for a socialist direction since there was no other way to get rid of the poverty of a country like India.<sup>138</sup> In this she presented herself as a pro-poor leader and one who understood their plight. She justified her economic measures on this. In the same

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, September 8, 1969.

<sup>138</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, September 13, 1969.



vein, Mrs. Gandhi said that bold steps would be taken to implement the socialistic programme of the Congress party and emphasised the concept of a mixed economy.<sup>139</sup>

The Syndicate found it impossible to counter the Prime Minister's initial advantage in her identification with the "progressive forces" and tried desperately to achieve a strategic advantage. Mrs. Gandhi's performance during this period however came in for fulsome praise by the *Washington Post*.<sup>140</sup> Max Lerner, who described himself as "an almost professional Nehru watcher," testified that Mrs. Gandhi's performance has been such that her own father could not have done better. Mr. Lerner added, "she was now become a politician in her own right." He praised her for fighting a "tough fight and a thoroughly democratic one" and for once again getting the "jerked economy moving ahead." Mrs. Gandhi's strong political leadership filled the vacuum created since Nehru's passing away. She was saluted in her efforts to revolutionise Indian economy. If the party leaders had tried to break Mrs. Gandhi's spirit, Mr. Lerner said, she had the right to appeal beyond them to the party's voters.

#### *THE FINAL COUNTDOWN*

The final count down to a formal split in the Congress was triggered by the resignation of the chief of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee Mr. C. Subramaniam, when a majority of Kamaraj loyalists

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<sup>139</sup> *The Statesman*, New Delhi, September 23, 1969.

<sup>140</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, September 3, 1969.

in the state organisation passed a petition of no-confidence in his leadership. Mrs. Gandhi used the move to launch a counter attack on the Congress President and initiated moves that were to bring the crisis to the brink and spell out in clear terms who stood where in the then political continuum. Mrs. Gandhi's supporters began to collect signatures for an emergency meeting of the All India Congress Committee to elect a new Congress Working Committee. During October 1969 Mrs. Gandhi's supporters fanned out to various states for a fortnight to collect signatures of almost 400 AICC members on a requisition demanding election of a new Congress President by the end of December 1969. Mrs. Gandhi was trying to test the fact of her acceptance in the states. However the pattern of the support in the different states for Mrs. Gandhi, were positive.<sup>141</sup> Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Assam which were considered to be Syndicate strong-holds, shifted their support to the Prime Minister. The left of ideological posture taken by the Prime Minister and the clear indication of a mass upsurge in her favour were the main factors behind the change in the factional alignment in the states. In the short span of three months since the Bangalore session of the AICC in July 1969, the balance of forces had undergone a radical change. Three factors could be said to have brought about the transformation in favour of Mrs. Gandhi.<sup>142</sup> The first to note was that Mr. Y. V. Chavan had moved over to Mrs. Gandhi's side and

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<sup>141</sup> A.M.Zaidi and S.G.Zaidi (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. 21, 556-570.

<sup>142</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, October 24, 1969.

unequivocally associated himself with her. The second factor working in Mrs. Gandhi's favour was her identification with the radical urges within the party. Her professions about "socialism" had gained a new credibility in the eyes of the public with her decision to nationalise the banks. The upsurge in popular support had surely added to her stature in the party as well as the country. The third factor in her favour was that she was in office which gave her the power to reward her supporters and punish those opposed to her.

While Mrs. Gandhi's supporters sensed that they were one up on the Syndicate, peace moves continued to be initiated but proved non-starters.<sup>143</sup> This was because of a hardening of attitudes by both camps. The estrangement at the Congress top appeared complete with the move of the Congress President dropping three pro-Indira members, Subramaniam, F. A. Ahmed and S. D. Sharma from the Congress Working Committee.<sup>144</sup> This was in retaliation to Mrs. Gandhi's earlier action of dropping four junior ministers in her government, who were perceived to be closely associated with senior Syndicate leaders or were involved in political activities that were unacceptable to the pro-Mrs. Gandhi faction. All this pointed to the fact that the dissensions within the Congress were far removed from

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<sup>143</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta, October 25, 1969, October 28, 1969 and November 3, 1969. The chief ministers, particularly of states like Mysore and Assam became the focal point of these peace moves. Meetings with chief ministers belonging to both camps were convened, but no major formula emerged out of these meetings. It was reported that all the peace makers were convinced that Mrs. Gandhi and Mr. Nijalingappa should meet to discuss the entire gamut of issues dividing the rival factions. See *The Statesman*, Calcutta, October 28, 1969 and November 1, 1969.

<sup>144</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, November 1, 1969. Also, Interview, Kolkata, 25.04.06.

ideology and it was essentially an issue of shifting loyalties in a power-struggle. These actions symbolised no ideological justification.<sup>145</sup>

The split in the Congress became a reality. Throughout October and November 1969 headlines in leading dailies gave maximum coverage to the crisis that rocked Indian politics. Editorials and analyses dwelt on the nature of the crisis and its purported aftermath. *The Statesman* commented,<sup>146</sup> that the tragedy lay in the humiliating truth that the upheaval could be traced to nothing of any substance – that is, no momentous issue of high policy, no genuine commitment, no recognisable ideology had led to the present disarray: only factionalism on so petty a scale as to be incredible. It was a sordid tale of cynical manoeuvres, planted stories and defections. The editorial concluded by observing that a Prime Minister belonging to a party so irreconcilably riven, was in no moral position, whatever the situation in the parliamentary party, to provide the leadership the country needed. The only thing that remained was appeal to the people, for theirs' was a verdict that had yet to be heard. *The Times of India* noted<sup>147</sup> that “the question was not of avoiding a break-up out of joining the parts. The Congress was disintegrating because its leader no longer believed in arriving at decisions by consensus. It was a fallacy to think that a democratic party could keep its vigour only so long as the majority was able to have its way on every issue; in fact the majority could retain its authority only as long as it took good care

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<sup>145</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, November 1, 1969 and *The Statesman*, New Delhi, November 1, 1969.

<sup>146</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta, November 3, 1969, Editorial.

<sup>147</sup> *The Times of India*, New Delhi, November 3, 1969, Editorial.

not to push the minority to the wall. So deep was the distrust between the two groups in the Congress that neither was prepared to abide by the rules of the game.”

On November 12, the Congress Party formally split with the official Congress Working Committee taking the expected and fateful decision to expel Mrs. Gandhi from the organisation. The die was cast. The following day the Congress Parliamentary Party with the claimed attendance of 330 out of 427 members reaffirmed its confidence in Mrs. Gandhi’s leadership.<sup>148</sup> The opening of the winter session of Parliament on November 16, 1969 brought into sharp focus the equations of the Congress groups with opposition elements in the party-system.<sup>149</sup> The Swatantra and Jana Sangh were predictably with the Syndicate while Mrs. Gandhi’s Congress was supported by the Socialists, Communists, DMK, Akali Dal and Independents. However, a point to be noted here is that the leftist opposition parties’ assessment of the Congress split was not uniform. While the CPI, the S. M. Joshi faction of the SSP, the S. N. Dwivedy group in the PSP and the DMK tended to accept more readily the socialist credentials of Mrs. Gandhi, the CPI (M), Madhu Limaye – Raj Narain faction of the SSP and the H. V. Kamath group in the PSP were inclined to regard the split as a reflection of power struggle in the ruling party and demanded specific evidence of her socialist professions. Moreover these leftist parties realised they were too weak and fragmented to

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<sup>148</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta, November 14, 1969. Also *Congress Bulletin*, (October-November, 1969), 11-15.

<sup>149</sup> Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., “The Congress in India: Crisis and Split” in *Asian Survey* (March, 1970), 256-262.

make a bid for political power on their own, so they extended support to Mrs. Gandhi's government with a view to pressurise it to move further left. These leftist parties regarded the Congress split as a positive development, in that they felt, it carried forward the process of polarisation from which they stood to benefit.<sup>150</sup> The split rendered Mrs. Gandhi's government to a minority status and it was from this position that she went into the fifth general elections of 1971.

### CONCLUSION

If basic political differences finally split the Congress party asunder in 1969, then it also established that the interlude of collective leadership was over as was the era of united Congress party rule. It was remarked that there could be no doubt that Mrs. Gandhi had emerged much stronger from the split.<sup>151</sup> The "dumb doll" had been transformed into a confident, assertive and dominant leader to whom the appellation "ruthless" had also began to be attached. Her mass appeal was never in doubt. The crowds always supported her wholeheartedly. She had convinced them that the split had taken place because she was fighting for the interests of common people. Mrs. Gandhi certainly displayed more sensitivity than other leaders to popular aspirations. Hence people believed her to be a symbol of hope and change. According to A. Kidwai, charisma, tradition and striking power played a decisive role in Mrs. Gandhi emerging the winner in

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<sup>150</sup> Mahendra Prasad Singh, *Split in a Predominant Party*, 100-101.

<sup>151</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 124.

the battle with the all-powerful Syndicate.<sup>152</sup> Throughout it was Mrs. Gandhi who was setting the agenda while others were only reacting to her moves. In a sense it marked Mrs. Gandhi's coming of age in politics and her emergence as the country's most outstanding leader. Katherine Frank remarked that the 'great split' of Congress in 1969 marked a milestone in her development as well as Indian political history.<sup>153</sup> She had come into her own. *The New York Times* commented that Mrs. Gandhi had proved herself a courageous tough-minded politician as well as an exceedingly skilful tactician – a Prime Minister in her own right and not a transitional figure, trading on her legacy as the daughter of Nehru.<sup>154</sup>

What the split of 1969 had done was to redefine the relationship between government and organisation in a ruling party. It cemented Mrs. Gandhi's hold over the Congress Party. She revealed a determined ruthlessness in this fight that had not been seen before and this would become more evident in her handling of the problems developing in India's neighbouring country.

In the post-1967 situation in which non-Congress united fronts ruled in a number of states, Mrs. Gandhi was reinforced in her conviction that the prime minister could not be a prisoner of the party machine and that he or she had to seek and win the cooperation of state governments run by anti-Congress coalitions.<sup>155</sup> The party

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<sup>152</sup> A. Kidwai, *Indira Gandhi: Charisma and Crisis* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1969), 139.

<sup>153</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 318.

<sup>154</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 318-319.

<sup>155</sup> Rajni Kothari, "India: Oppositions in a Consensual Polity" in Robert A. Dahl (Ed.), *Regimes and Oppositions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 322-324. In Kothari's words, "Soon after the

managers feared that Mrs. Gandhi's approach would be detrimental to the party's interests and it would make it extremely difficult for Congress to stage a come-back. This problem of relationship between the party and government, which manifested itself both at the national and state level, was an important aspect of what Iqbal Narain called the politics of individuation.<sup>156</sup> This phase signified individualization of politics in terms of the personal quest for power and the setting apart of competing personalities and groups. In the opinion of Narain, the year 1969 marked a critical phase in the history of politics of individuation in India culminating in the split, which was the result of a rather protracted conflict between the organisational wing and the government in the specific context of the office of the prime minister. The split marked the triumph of the parliamentary wing over the organisational wing of the party.

The split in the Congress party provided Mrs. Gandhi with a real opportunity to start afresh the process of political restructuring. She had defeated the Syndicate and dispensed with Morarji Desai and his conservative followers. She was still prime minister of the country because the parties of the left and the Tamil and Sikh regionalists were supporting her rather than her opponents. She was aware that she would soon need a fresh mandate from the electorate.

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formation of Congress and non-Congress governments in the different states in 1967, the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Gandhi and her close associates were able to develop a comfortable *quid pro quo* with the chief ministers in the states, including non-Congress chief ministers."

<sup>156</sup> Iqbal Narain, "Democratic Politics and Political Development in India," in *Asian Survey* (February, 1970), 88-99.



Throughout 1969 up to the split, Mrs. Gandhi's responses to events and situations revealed a strategy with the help of which she mobilized her political resource and targets. The strategy was that she imparted a leftist stance to her party's programme through such measures as sending a note to the AICC session at Bangalore in July 1969 regarding the implementation of the party's economic programme, divesting Morarji Desai of the finance portfolio in 1969, supporting veteran trade-unionist Mr. Giri for the 1969 presidential election and finally the nationalisation of fourteen banks. On account of these Mrs. Gandhi received a considerable measure of support for her government from the left parties. The split and its aftermath paved the way for the socialists and communists who left the Congress in the 1930s and 1940s to re-enter the party.<sup>157</sup> It reestablished the left as an important political faction inside Mrs. Gandhi's Congress. For the left this was an opportunity to wield significant influence in ensuring that socialist policies get underway, thereby, affecting the course of national level politics. The alliance forged between the leftists and Mrs. Gandhi lent a new dimension to Indian politics till the fifth general elections of 1971.

She injected into India's political vocabulary such words as "socialism", "nationalisation", "progressive", all aimed at mass mobilization cutting across caste lines by populist arousal of public expectations from the government. Mrs. Gandhi's populism

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<sup>157</sup> Francine R Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 433.

undoubtedly excited a mass response that had been absent in India since independence.

Through the split Mrs. Gandhi brought about the most definitive change in Indian politics. It changed the character and structure of India's most vital political core: the Congress Party. The change was viewed generally as breathing a new life and purpose into a moribund body. Moreover, she had been able to infuse energy and pace into the political process by talking of "ideology" and this became a complementary factor in the mobilization and transformation of the politically apathetic, poorer sections of public into a politically relevant and demanding segment. That these changes were to have far reaching consequences would become evident in the fifth general elections of 1971.