Chapter VII

Media and the Industrial Policy of the Left Front: The Take-off

7.1 Locating Mediation

By institutionalising power of communication, mass media has emerged as one of the crucial agencies of political networking in the liberal democracies. Media constructs ‘public’ and ‘public opinion’ with its access to information as resources, centrality in deliberation and its power in ‘the framing of the mind’ that helps the “interpretative processes in the human mind” (Castells, 2011: 158). As discussed in Chapter I, the political engagement of mass media emanates from its key role in agenda-setting that involves certain negotiations with messages, political ideologies, processes or actors, and provides certain frameworks to interpret the world. Mediatisation of politics follows from the role of news as ‘public knowledge’ producing numerous messages, images or representations to evolve into a meaning-making process. Schudson has described (1995) the importance of ‘the news media as political institution’ and explained the growing media activism in many of the democratic societies in the context of ‘shaping politics’. From the beginning of the Left Front regime, the Bengali language press had gradually assumed this ‘insider’ role, going beyond its external ‘observer’ position, particularly in the context of occasional lull in oppositional politics in the state, and thus playing the role of ‘mobilising agent’ at times.

Situating the debates on media-politics interface in the context of the three and half decades of the Left Front rule, one can identify interesting traits of mediatisation by exploring the mainstream media’s coverage of the Left-led governance. As noted in the previous chapters, media-politics interface unfolded in a dynamic relationship between the vernacular media and the Left Front governments in these decades, and had generated numerous contending images of the Front regime. One of the primary domains of this image-making and representation of the regime was the industrial policies and strategies, the coverage of which can broadly be classified in two phases. The first phase represented the first decade of the Left Front regime (1977-1987), marked by a visible prioritisation to agricultural reforms in the Front’s political and administrative
programmes. As noted in Chapter III, the ‘Operation Barga’ programme represented the essence of the politics of redistributive reforms in the agrarian sector in the first decade. The focus on industrialisation received comparatively low attention, both in the Front’s agenda of governance and in the public sphere in first few years. However, during this decade the Left Front governments thought of “industrial revival” of the state and some of the important policy strategies around industrialisation were accordingly made. Besides, the state politics witnessed tremulous moments with the gradual heightening of the Centre-state conflict in the mid 1980s. It can be noted that the discord around federal distribution of power was largely fed by the industrial policy-making efforts of the Left Front governments and politics around the industrialisation programme. The first phase of industrial policy-making, therefore, was marked by interesting polemics in the Front-led governance and sustained political mobilisation anchored in committed ideological pronouncements of the Left Front. The second phase can be identified as the ‘great leap forward’ to industrialisation since late 1990s that featured an intense ‘search for capital’ and visible hypes towards rapid industrialisation. This last phase of the Left Front regime also produced crucial debates over the nature and processes of industrialisation programme that stirred the politics of West Bengal to a great height. Mainstream media coverage of the Front governments’ industrial policy strategies in these two phases unfolded an interesting narrative of media encoding in terms of modes, images and languages and media activism in an unprecedented level.

As discussed in Chapter IV, the industrial scenario gradually deteriorated in West Bengal after the independence. The initial attempts of the Congress governments in the establishment of heavy and infrastructural industries could not be sustained due to increasing economic crisis borne out of colonial legacy and national industrial policies effecting regional economic structures. The oft-mentioned licensing and freight equalisation policies caused serious obstacles for the industrial development of the eastern states and these policy and strategies emerged as a crucial bone of contention in the Centre-state relations in the subsequent years. The state suffered from acute employment crisis due to retrenchment, lay-offs and wage-cut since 1950s and the crisis gradually paved the way for radical workers’ movement in the state, mostly led by the Left. The two United Front regimes in the late 1960s witnessed severe industrial unrest,
strikes and gradual flight of capital from the state that continued even in the 1970s. The lack of investment and steady decline of the industrial health emerged as a serious public concern in the state, which received wide coverage in the Bengali media.

The Left Front fought the Assembly election in 1977 with the Common Minimum Programme that demanded nationalisation of basic industries, restrictions on monopoly capital and multinational corporations, strengthening of public sector and small and cottage industries. After coming to power, the Front leaders, on several occasions, strongly professed the intention of the Front government in securing workers’ democratic rights in industries along with restoring the declining state of industries in West Bengal. While the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu assured the industrialists of their role and legitimate demands in the industrialisation programme of the Left Front, the then State Secretary of the CPI(M) and Chairman of the Left Front, Promode Dasgupta, stressed on (2011: 65) the Front’s “strategy of struggle with the tactics of isolating the big landowners and monopoly capitalists.” In the following years, the state politics witnessed certain visible traits of tensions in Front governance in pursuing its ideological commitment in the context of economic compulsions of running a state government under the federal structure. The mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media widely articulated the concern of the industrialists about their possible relations with the Left-led government in the context of the pro-worker ideological persuasions of the Front. The Front government declared its first industrial policy in 1978 and the document reflected the political-economic visions of the Left Front government on industrialisation programme of the state. The mainstream Bengali press covered the industrial strategies from different vantage points facilitating public discussions on industrialisation and mediating images of the Left-led governance in the process.

7.2 The ‘Take-off’ in Mediation

The coming of the Left Front in state power in June 1977 was received with mixed reactions in the Bengali press. The immediate response of ABP to the victory of the Left Front was anchored in an overt welcoming note with the presupposition that the Front government would “show their organisational magic” (ABP, 16 June, 1977) in administration as well. It assured (ABP, 16 June, 1977) support to the government if “the
interest of the state” was considered as “primary” and the “democratic values” were maintained. This hinted at the penchant of the newspaper in adopting a watchdog role based on its own ideological positioning and commercial interests. The broad tenor of the subsequent mediation strategies of ABP was set in a post-editorial by the veteran journalist and litterateur, Gourkishore Ghosh, raising crucial questions about the future course of action of the major partner of the Front, CPI(M) in governance – “revolution or vigorous reform?” (1977: 4). ABP, from the very first day of covering the industrialisation programme, endorsed its predisposition in favour of liberal values and critique of Left ideological discourse. The inclination emerged prominently in its mediation that articulated a specific kind of economic and political agenda based on its own vision of modernisation and industrialisation, adjusting the framing accordingly to suit the role. In tune with this agenda-setting function, from the beginning of the Left Front regime, ABP covered extensively the ‘concern’ and perspectives of the industrialists both in hard news and editorial pages, going beyond routine reporting and depending on an evident commentator-interpreter role in op-ed pages. As noted in Chapter II, ABP’s encoding strategies were broadly framed on its targeted audience of an urban, educated upper and middle class population. Industrialisation programme received core attention in the strategy to reach the constituency and this was reflected in appropriate selection of news or promotion of a pro-capital opinionated space. On the other hand, Ganashakti’s coverage of the industrial policies of the Front government, from the beginning, rested on the political-ideological commitment of the Left Front, particularly the CPI(M) and accordingly, represented an evidently different focus from the ‘bourgeois’ newspapers’ “pro-capital” stand. As the party newspaper, Ganashakti contested ABP’s predisposition to capital and articulated strongly the Left ideological discourse favouring working class interests as its dominant agenda. Its framing of news attempted to represent an ‘alternative’ image of the Front governance in terms of industrialisation efforts. At the same time, as ‘partisan’ newspaper it focussed on expanding the support base in favour of the Front’s ideological commitments and persuade ‘supporters’ to this end playing its role as ‘mobilising agent’. The contestation between the media houses, especially between ABP and Ganashakti, gave birth to contending judgments on industrialisation and thereby fed the public opinion in their
respective ways. *Aajkal* and *Bartaman*, established in the decade of 1980s, gradually built up their own sphere of influence in the Bengali news world. *Aajkal* broadly attempted to uphold a balancing perspective in representing the industrial policies of the first two Left Front governments setting aside any trait of high-pitched coverage in framing. It can be mentioned that industrial policy debates did not get much coverage in the Lead, but were placed mainly in the front page news or anchor stories and in op-ed pages of *Aajkal*. 

*Bartaman* adopted a unique conversational framing mode to appropriate the interests of the semi-urban, middle and lower middle class population as its broad target audience. From the beginning, it pitched for a watchdog and, on occasions, adversarial role in bringing out the ‘limitations’ of the industrialisation efforts of the Front. Accordingly, its coverage greatly rested on aspects like ‘corruption’, ‘nepotism’ of the Front government in the industrialisation programmes.

### 7.3 Industrial Vision: First Left Front Government

The Left Front fought the Assembly election in 1977 with a 36-point Charter of demand embodied in the Common Minimum Programme, which demanded (Document#1) nationalisation of basic industries and restrictions on monopoly capital and multinational corporations. The Common Minimum Programme emphasised on (Document#1) addressing the problem of sickness in industries and providing special incentives to the cottage industries and small and medium scale industries in terms of infrastructural support. After coming to power in 1977, the Left Front Committee drafted a guiding framework of industrialisation programme for the state to address the deteriorating conditions of employment and investment in the state. The first industrial policy of the Left Front government adopted in 1978 was visibly tuned with the Front’s ideological commitments to public sector economy and workers’ democratic rights and a strong disapprobation of private and monopoly capital. The rhetorical trumpeting against big and monopoly capital and predisposition to public investments framed the subsequent courses of the Front’s political mobilisation to a great extent. From the beginning, the Bengali press contributed greatly in generating the polemic around industrialisation in public deliberations.
7.3.1 Framing the Industrial Policy of 1978

ABP’s framing of the industrial policy adopted a distinct slant in encoding with a visible predisposition to private capital and criticism of state-controlled economy. During the drafting of the new industrial policy by the three-member committee in the Front, the position of ABP on industrialisation got overtly reflected in an editorial commenting upon (ABP, 6 December, 1977) the “essence of industrial policy”:

“It is to be seen that the proposals of the committee do not sink in the quicksand of ‘ism’...the aim of the industrial policy should be the welfare of the state. Whether it satisfies the real welfare of the state should be the consideration. Deviation from idealism is not an important concern.”

Just after the formation of the Front government in June, 1977, the editorial articulated (ABP, 5 July, 1977) the ‘anxiety’ of the industrialists vis-à-vis their relationship with the Left-led government. However, it expressed (ABP, 5 July, 1977) its faith as well in the ‘assurance’ of the then Chief Minister to the members of the Chamber of Commerce:

“It is not unnatural for the industrialists to feel uncomfortable in the victory of the Left Front. But the new government is pragmatic...it will not be surprising to see that they are not appeasing the industrialists. However, the government has assured that it will not ignore the legitimate demands of the industrialists.”

The editorial visibly strengthened (ABP, 5 July, 1977) ABP’s positioning in this assessment with its warning that industrialisation was not possible with a “khondito drishtibhongi” (truncated viewpoint). Inspite of its critical stand on the “Stalinist regimentation” in the ruling Left Front or politics of militant trade unionism, the editorial, in the first instance, had rallied (ABP, 5 July, 1977) with the Front government in reminding the industrialists of their “social responsibility in the changed situation” as well. A special report (ABP, 4 August, 1977) on the “initial observations” of the industrialists and economists of the industrial thought of the government found it to be “realistic”. The preference of the newspaper in favour of business capital was evidently articulated, from the beginning, in its placing and selection of news. While it gave scant attention to the statement of the then Labour Minister of the Front government, that the government would not remain ‘silent’ if force was adopted in industrial dispute (ABP, 8 November, 1977), it covered (ABP, 20 November, 1977; ABP, 4 December, 1977) the ‘positive intention’ of the industrialists to invest in West Bengal with much importance in the front pages.
Complying with its insistence on ‘pragmatism’, *ABP*’s framing consistently rested on (*ABP*, 15 September, 1982) the disapprobation of “bookish Marxism” as against “the requirements of the Left Front” and a “positive attitude” in the competitive economy. This advocacy was articulated manifestly in welcoming (*ABP*, 22 September, 1978) the “pragmatic industrial policy” of the Front government. *ABP* appreciated (*ABP*, 22 September, 1978) the ‘intention’ of the government to expand the industrial base as “reflection of pragmatism and farsightedness”, and the decision to ‘cooperate’ with the large industrial houses or multinational corporations running the old industries in the state to rejuvenate the industrial production. The editorial commented (*ABP*, 22 September, 1978):

“…judging in terms of idealism, the decision may sound wrong. The expansion of large industrial houses or multinational corporations is not considered desirable by the Leftists. But the main issue is related to the welfare of the state, not idealism.”

On a number of occasions, *ABP* made its preference clear for the large investments in restoring the industrial health of the state. It noted the importance of small and medium industrial sector as the essential basis of big industrialisation in the state but did not cover the policy developments in the sector with proportionate importance. Accordingly, the ‘committed’ pronunciations of the Front government (Document#2) in the first industrial policy like “lessening the stronghold of the (domestic) monopoly houses and multinational firms on the economy of the state” as one of the major goals and “…no question of new multinational units to come in” were mostly criticised in such evaluative judgment and marginalised in hard news.

*Ganashakti*, from the beginning, articulated its strong propagation for public sector economy and the negation of the role of big and multinational capital in the industrialisation programme of the state, as against the ‘bourgeois’ media’s ‘pro-capital’ stand. The representations of *Ganashakti* often reflected the feature of cross-referencing with the verbatim coverage of the documents of the Front or official government declarations. It relied on ‘authentic’ representation of the Front government’s policy statements on industrialisation programmes. Along with that, the comparatively underreported dimensions of the industrial policy, particularly in the coverage of the
‘bourgeois’ media were consciously restored in the party newspaper to serve the purposes of political propaganda.

In early January of 1978, *Ganashakti* covered (*Ganashakti*, 7 January, 1978), in a four-column Lead, the press conference of the then Front Chairman, Promode Dasgupta, reporting on the drafting of the first industrial policy in the Front meeting. The subsequent editorials highlighted (*Ganashakti*, 8 January, 1978; *Ganashakti*, 13 February, 1979) the basic objectives of the policy as removal of the sickness of the industries, creation of new opportunities of employment, diversification of industries, focussing more on the small and medium scale industries in industrialisation instead of large monopoly capital or multinational corporations. *Ganashakti* expressed (*Ganashakti*, 15 February, 1978) “firm belief” that the government would be successful in “identifying the real disease” of the sick public enterprises and “converting those from burdens to assets”. The party newspaper gave wide coverage (*Ganashakti*, 23 February, 1978; *Ganashakti*, 10 April, 1978), in the front pages as the Lead, to the formal declarations of the general industrial policy and the small and cottage sector policy by the then concerned Ministers, Kanailal Bhattacharyya and Chittabrata Majumdar respectively, in the Assembly. Since 1979, *Ganashakti* coverage endorsed (*Ganashakti*, 13 February, 1979; *Ganashakti*, 17 December, 1979) the rhetorical pronunciation of the Front – “well-integrated development of agriculture and industry” in the rejuvenation of the economy of the state. The then Chief Minister later reiterated (*Ganashakti*, 18 April, 1985) the need of “an economic tie between agriculture and industry” and propagated strongly for agriculture-based industrialisation in the state. It can be noted here that this ‘integral link’ between agriculture and industry received a hyped attention through the rhetoric – *Agriculture is our foundation, Industry is the future* during the seventh Left Front government. The Front governments in the last decade of its rule targeted agro-based industrialisation as one of the principal components of its industrialisation programme that faced serious critique both within and outside the Front. The ‘continuity’ in the Front government’s stance on the agriculture-industry relations or agro-industrialisation was, however, unnoticed publicly and found little space in the Bengali media’s representations in the early period.
In the following years, the party newspaper’s coverage of industrialisation programme concentrated broadly on three components of the official industrial policy: prioritisation of small and cottage industries, problem of closed and sick industries and establishment of new industries. Since 1977, the Left Front government envisaged a key role to the public sector and stressed on the review and rejuvenation of the public enterprises incurring consistent loss and suffering from declining production. The Front leadership acknowledged the dearth of new investments as one of the important factors causing industrial stagnation in the state and thought of diversification of industries. Accordingly, the Front government proclaimed its intention to expand the industrial base by establishing basic industries like infrastructure and raw material. It prioritised the setting up of petrochemical, pharmaceutical, ship building, cement industries, etc. Ganashakti argued (Ganashakti, 17 December, 1979) that the “task” was not “an easy one as the state lacked financial strength” and the “basic and heavy industries fell under the Union List”, providing cues to the readers of the implication of the constitutional arrangement in the context of industrialisation programme of a provincial government. As previously mentioned, while the Left Front adopted a strong stance against private capital, the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, urged the ‘cooperation’ of the industrialists from the very first day. The disjunction in the party-government posturing was addressed in Ganashakti in a subtle tone. Though it reported (Ganashakti, 14 October, 1979; Ganashakti, Lead, 9 September, 1984), on several occasions, Jyoti Basu’s request to the private sector to set up industries in the state, the dominant coverage was evidently tuned with a pro-public sector disposition and opposition to big industrialists and monopoly capital. The framing gradually accommodated an over-arching agenda of restructuring federal relations to gain more powers for the state and end “discrimination” of the Centre. Ganashakti’s representations generated a grand narrative of “discrimination” in interpreting the essence of the federal tussle in its mediation and in the process, facilitated the Front’s political mobilisation by providing sustenance to the agenda with incessant coverage. At the same time, it shed light on the less publicised areas of the Left Front government’s industrial policies, which were broadly marginalised in the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media’s coverage. Thus, it highlighted the “new plan” in the development of industry in the state like the establishment of the Industrial Development Agency under the aegis of the
Industry Ministry to encourage industrialisation in the underdeveloped areas of the state and modernisation of existing units. It was conceived as a single-window agency to “help the willing investors” (Ganashakti, 6 July, 1984), which was later named as ‘shilpobondhu’ (friend of industry).

It is noteworthy that the industrialisation programme received less space compared to the agricultural reforms in the early coverage of the Front government in the party newspaper and ABP. In the first two years of the Front rule (July1977-June 1979), while the land reforms and rural development programmes were covered in one hundred and twenty seven columns as front page Lead in party newspaper, industrial policy reporting received only sixty columns. The Lead and the Special Articles, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Front government on 21 June, 1978, covered the ‘success areas’ of the Left Front government as strengthening of people’s enterprise and self-confidence or close relationship of the government with the people, rural housing to the homeless, rural development and the role of the government in the interest of peasants and agriculture. There was, however, no special coverage of the industrialisation programme in this assessment. The relative absence of industrialisation policies in ABP and party newspaper’s representations reflected the Front government’s primary attention to the rural sector vis-à-vis industrialisation programmes in the initial years.

7.3.2 Spinning the Media ‘War’

From the beginning, the respective positioning in framing of industrial policies in ABP and Ganashakti generated contradictory narratives which set the ground for subsequent processes of agenda setting for the two newspapers and a corresponding ‘tussle’ in the mediation. As noted in Chapter IV, the composition of the first industrial policy of the Front government reflected an evident positioning against the role of the big capital and foreign investment in the state. ABP and Ganashakti upheld completely different dimensions in covering the Chief Minister’s meet with the industrialists after coming to power. Ganashakti’s reporting of the Chief Minister’s successive meets with the industrialists was evidently attuned with the Front’s political opposition to anti-monopoly capitalism. Ganashakti stressed (Ganashakti, 26 July, 1977) that the Chief Minister had urged the industrialists to “change” their attitude and “adjust” to the “changed situation”
in the establishment of the Left Front government in the state. *ABP*, on the other hand, quoted (*ABP*, 20 August, 1977) the Chief Minister ‘assuring’ the industrialists in the meeting of the Chamber of Commerce – “industrialists need not to be nervous” and projected (*ABP*, 26 July, 1977) the “positive response” of the industrialists to the call of the Chief Minister to cooperate with the government. In covering the same meeting with the industrialists, *Ganashakti* substantiated (*Ganashakti*, 20 August, 1977) its position with a strong suggestive tone, quoting Jyoti Basu that “the industrialists should come forward to cooperate staying away from conspiring against the Left government like the past years” and the government “would see” how it could help them. Jyoti Basu talked of (*Ganashakti*, 21 August, 1977) “mutual cooperation” and the “responsibilities’ of the capitalists” in the meet. The framing in both cases was indicative of selective representation, even if they involved hard news, to suit the predetermined frame of the respective newspapers.

The aggressive pro-public sector and anti-private sector stand of the Left Front, however, found an important shift since the second term of the Left Front government. The changing intonation of the industrial thoughts was reflected in Jyoti Basu’s ‘appeal’ to the industrialists that was incorporated in the Lead in the party newspaper as well. He commented (*Ganashakti*, 19 January, 1985):

“We know that socialism has not been established here. We are working in the capitalist system. The private sector has a role to play in this system. You have to play the role seriously in the interest of the industrial development.”

In this context, it can be mentioned that a great part of the Bengali press’ coverage of the Front’s policy decisions followed the opinion leaders in political and civil societies along with sourcing the news on formal government proclamations. Thus, both *ABP* and *Ganashakti*, provided greater attention and sustenance of the issues in their coverage according to the primacy given by the leaders of the government, especially the Chief Minister or leaders of the Front and the Opposition. *Ganashakti*, as the party newspaper, reproduced statements of the Front committees or Front government as ‘official’ and relied greatly on the ‘collective’ voice of the Front and the party. The framing and the narratives generated in *ABP’*s mediation, on the other hand, consolidated personalisation of politics, favouring individuals over the party. It is interesting to find that both the
newspapers abundantly quoted the then Chief Minister as the ‘official’ source of their coverage, but at the same time they provoked public opinion with mutually opposing interpretations.

The early framing of the Front government’s industrial thoughts in ABP reflected somewhat reserved or cautious representations. While addressing the ‘claim’ of the Opposition that industries in West Bengal were heading towards a ruin and the industrialists were leaving the state, ABP and Aajkal supported the Front government’s allegations of ‘negligence’ against the Central government as well. The Front leadership was quite vocal about the ‘discrimination’ of the Central government to the state’s industrial programmes and gradually pushed the agenda at the core of the political battle in the 1980s. The party newspaper played a very important role in this political mobilisation by its repeated coverage (Ganashakti, 13 February, 1979; Ganashakti, 16 June, 1979; Ganashakti, 13 April, 1980) of the “obstacles” arising out of the “constitutional limitations” in the processes of industrialisation, holding the Centre responsible for thwarting the state’s efforts. It rallied in favour of the Front’s emerging demand of “more power to the hands of the state”, asking for a reorganisation of the Centre-state relations. It is important to note that the arguments received periodic support in the ‘bourgeois’ media like ABP, Aajkal and Bartaman which was otherwise termed as “organiser of anti-Left forces of any colour” (Basu, 1997: 231) by the Front leadership on several occasions. The convergence perhaps appropriated the tenor of the anti-Centre, anti-Congress political lineage in Bengal, which was integral to certain traits of provincialism in general and political-cultural traditions of Bengal in particular. The spirit found vigorous expression in an article in Bartaman in early 1987. Responding to the victory of the Left Front for the third term in March 1987, the post-ed author in Bartaman remarked (Ghosh, 1987b: 4), in reference to “injustice, deprivation, deception of the Central government”, that “the rebellion of Bengal had achieved a permanent character” and “it could no longer be suppressed”. ABP editorials also observed (ABP, 30 March, 1979; ABP, 7 April, 1980), though with a restrained tone, that in respect to the decline of industrial development in West Bengal, the “fault” was not of the state government alone because the “negligence” and “unfavourable” attitude of the Central government had created “obstacles” in the path of industrialisation. Veteran journalist,
Ranajit Roy, in a post-editorial in *ABP*, strongly criticised (1979: 4) the “‘discrimination’ of the Centre against the Eastern region” reinforcing the Front leaders’ anguish. The editorial in *ABP* caustically remarked (*ABP*, 7 April, 1980) that to the Centre, “some areas are *suorani* (queen dearly loved by the king) and others *duorani* (queen neglected by the king)⁵...this discrimination is mysterious.” The convergence was not to be located only in the media texts but it also reflected the ‘transient’ conformity between the Bengali media and the Front government on provincial sentiments. This episodic convergence was, however, short-lived as *ABP*, *Aajkal* and *Bartaman* gradually directed their attention in highlighting the ‘poor performance’ of the Front government in industrialisation programme, while *Ganashakti* and the Front forcefully contradicted (Basu, 1997: 243) the “vilification campaign” of the “local newspapers” to “malign the Left Front government and leaders through publication of highly distorted news.”

7.3.3 Contending Narratives of ‘Performance’

Since late 1970s, the public attention was increasingly drawn to the ‘declining’ state of the West Bengal’s economy, especially of the increasing industrial disputes, sickness, unemployment, labour troubles and power crisis, with the Opposition staging protests against the Front government’s ‘failures’ to address the issues. The Bengali press emerged as one of the leading sites of propagandist politics lending emphatic commentaries of their own and setting agenda for the public deliberations on the issue of economic development. The adversarial coverage of the ‘bourgeois’ press reached its peak during the second Left Front regime which was countered vehemently by the party newspaper. *ABP* geared its criticism with its consistent reporting or comments on the power crisis, poor road conditions or labour problems in industrial enterprises causing a general decline of the state economy. *Bartaman* mostly concentrated on the corruption, nepotism in the Front rule and “shallow thoughts” (Ghosh, 1987a: 4) of the Left Front that supposedly hastened the deterioration of the industrial sector. *Aajkal* shared its discontent on militancy in labour movements and projected the ‘discord’ within the Front around industrialisation programme, dismantling the myth of the ‘united’ Front. The party newspaper, on the other hand, embarked on constructing a counter-narrative of the ‘negative’ images and stimulated the public debate with its own advocacy role by framing a ‘positive’ image of the industrial enterprises of the Front government based on
informative news or emotive representations. *Ganashakti*, on the eve of the Assembly election in 1982, assured (*Ganashakti*, 16 May, 1982) the readers of the “determination” of the Front government in building up industries in “its own efforts” inspite of the “limited economic powers” of the state.

The Front, in its industrial policy of 1978, envisaged a labour-intensive, decentralised and indigenous technology-based industrial development, to address the declining trends of employment. *Ganashakti*’s representations highlighted the Front’s “focus” on rural industrialisation, mostly underreported in the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media. The coverage of small and middle sector based policies rested on broadly two components: achievements of the Front government and critique of the Centre’s policy. It overwhelmingly appreciated the government’s efforts in “advancement of the sector” in terms like “praiseworthy and promising” (*Ganashakti*, 16 June, 1979), “evident improvement”, “noteworthy success” (*Ganashakti*, 28 May, 1980) or “positive enterprise” (Chakraborty, 1982: 2) and in the process of mediation, posed itself in favour of small and middle level industrialisation vis-à-vis the focus on the big and multinational capital investment championed by a section of big media like *ABP*. *Ganashakti*’s emotive framing of this policy-dimension went along with detailed informative coverage of the programmes, such as, “financial support from the state”, “opening of marketing centres”, “arrangement of credit from the banks and other financial institutions” (Chakraborty, 1982: 2; Sen, 1983: 2) and reports like number of units established or cooperatives formed. The party newspaper consolidated its propagandist role as well by publicising the “leading position” of the state in small and cottage industries in the country. Contradicting the ‘claim’, *Bartaman* was all along vocal against the “destruction of the strong foundation of the small industries” in West Bengal due to the “generosity of some opportunist leaders of the CPM, mafia and traders” (*Bartaman*, 19 February, 1987). The small and medium sector, however, received less coverage in *ABP*, *Bartaman* and *Aajkal* compared to the issues of industrial conflict, employment generation or big investment. *ABP* was manifestly engaged in priming the issue of big capital investments and the ‘obstacles’ in its path created by poor infrastructural facilities in the state.

Distancing itself from the initial appreciation of the Front government’s industrial thoughts, *ABP* gradually intensified (*ABP*, 11 September, 1979; *ABP*, 7 April, 1980;
ABP, 21 September, 1982) its critique of the “adverse industrial situation of the state” or “deadlock in industrial efforts” and the state government’s “reluctance” to the expansion of the private capital. The critical reviews widely referred to the opinion of the industrialists or the members of the Chamber of Commerce on the decreasing industrial output of the state and their ‘displeasure’ about strikes, lockouts or political-administrative hindrances in establishing industries. Conforming to the arguments of the industrial investors, ABP evidently articulated its conviction in favour of large or foreign capital investment for improving the industrial situation and a strong disapproval of strikes or other forms of radical labour movements in the industrial enterprises. The state government was held responsible for “chaos” and “ruin” in industries, in ABP and Bartaman’s coverage, caused by “severe power shortage”, “inadequate transport system” or “strikes at any hour” (ABP, 7 April, 1980; Ghosh, 1987a: 4). They projected the state as “first among the failures” (ABP, 28 January, 1985) in terms of power shortage or load-shedding and lock outs. ABP showed its consistent disapproval of the “slogan-centrism” (ABP, 13 February, 1985), “cheap gimmicks” or “hollow stunts” (Ghosh, 1985a: 4) of the Left Front. The framing of the ‘decline’ in industrial situation in the state in ABP’s mediation evidently displayed a counter-representation of Ganashakti by harping on a ‘negative role’ of the labour, especially of the trade unions in West Bengal. The conviction found strong corroboration in the editorial observation – “when they do not go for strike, they do not even work” (ABP, 7 April, 1980). It ridiculed the ‘peace’ in industrial situation, claimed by the Front government, by consistently highlighting the instances of labour troubles in different industrial units in the state. This kind of a committed pro-owner, anti-labour framing and priming of the issue of industrial conflicts actually set the dominant tone of the representations in ABP throughout 1980s. The Front and the party newspaper contested the “barracking” vehemently and projected a counter-narrative of pro-labour image of the government in their political articulation. Ganashakti editorial identified (Ganashakti, 17 December, 1980) the “blind, irrational, destructive opposition” of ABP as a product of its “devotion to bourgeois landlords and antagonism to a party of the toilers that oppose monopoly capital, feudalism and imperialism”. Barun Sengupta retorted in the post-editorial in ABP with data on the ‘declining’ economy of the state and remarking on the Ganashakti’s editorial that “wrath is more prominent than
logic” in its arguments (Sengupta, 1982c: 4). The ‘enmity’ intensified into a spate of words with ABP and Ganashakti publishing articles countering each other. The then State Secretary of the CPI(M), Saroj Mukherjee expressed (1985: 4) his strong displeasure in Ganashakti about the “vilification campaign against the CPI(M) State Committee and the Left Front government by a few big newspapers of West Bengal and Delhi”. Mukherjee termed (1985: 4) the journalists as “purchased-soul” and cited examples from the “political history of last forty years” when “this kind of suppression of truth and spate of slandering were unleashed” against the Left. ABP post-editorial answered back (Ghosh, 1985b: 4) that “Saroj Mukherjee and others want to hear only eulogy and not criticism from the journalists”.

In late March 1985 the anti-Congress crusade of the Left Front reached its height with the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, on one occasion, describing Calcutta as a “dying city”, and blaming the Left Front government solely for the decay. The Front leadership sharply reacted to the comments and immediately organised public opinion with meetings, protest rallies. Ganashakti incited the protest by publishing series of short write ups by Bengali intellectuals against the comment and articulating the ‘rage’ of protesting public in front page news, often with pictures, and editorials. ABP also expressed its discontent (ABP, 25 March, 1985) going with the public sentiments and brought in the reference of ‘deprivation’ of the state by the Centre in an editorial. Aajkal, however, did not cover the issue in the front page. This episodic convergence in representations in ABP and Ganashakti could, however, be related to the appeal to Bengali chauvinism and provincial sentiment.

ABP’s assessment of industrialisation at different levels exemplified versatility in its agenda-setting, which rested on the generation of certain long-standing perceptual frameworks about the industrialisation process, role of the industrialists, labour and the Left government in particular. The mediation strategies, over the decade of 1980s, continued to thrive in producing certain immediate and temporal messages and more importantly, certain grand imageries about the industrial policies of a Left-ruled government in general. At the same time, defying any obvious linearity in representation, occasional twists in the pro-big capital stand marked interesting disjunctions in the process of mediation. During July 1982, the government faced severe opposition to its
decision to lend a plot, of the Alipore Zoo’s possession, to the big industrial house, the Tatas, for constructing a hotel. Opposing the government’s move, Barun Sengupta, in one op-ed article in *ABP*, caustically raised (1982b: 4) question about the justification of showing ‘charity’ to the Tatas:

“Will the revolution of West Bengal be hastened if the poor Tatas are provided with this financial benefit? So far we have heard that the Congress (I) shed tears for the Tata-Birlas. Now we find that the revolutionaries weep no less for them.”

An interesting addendum to this commentary can be added here that reflects a unique angularity in *ABP*’s commercial policy. On the same day, *ABP* published a full page advertisement of the Tata Engineering, one of the leading units of the Tatas. Among the Bengali newspaper houses, *ABP* has always drawn the larger share of advertisements from the big industrial houses.

Since 1982, *ABP*’s mediation, in a subtle way, engaged in challenging the credibility of the ‘efforts’ of the Front government by questioning their commitment to industrialisation. Distancing from its faith shown in first few years in the ‘intention’ of the then Chief Minister in pursuing a ‘pragmatic’ policy, *ABP* started raising questions about some of his moves in respect to the industrialisation programmes. In a post-editorial, Barun Sengupta commented (1982a: 4) that the “strictness” showed by Jyoti Basu to control the trade union movement or improve the work culture of the government employees, were only “lok dekhano” (pretentious). The editorial in *ABP* also apprehended (*ABP*, 8 October, 1984) that the foreign trips of the Chief Minister to attract investments were more of a “symbolic” one than “fruitful” efforts. *ABP* evidently shifted from its previous stand of highlighting the Centre’s ‘discrimination’ as a major ‘obstacle’ to the state’s industrialisation, rallying with the Front, to label (Bhattacharya, 1984: 4) it as the Front’s attempt “to shun its responsibility” by “imposing blame on the Centre”.

The framing, however, was integral to *ABP*’s broader negotiation with the political forces and processes and thereby, setting an agenda of its own in the mediation. While distancing itself from the Front’s anti-Centre, especially anti-Congress agenda in those years, *ABP* was found to greet (*ABP*, 30 December, 1984) the victory of Congress (I) in the Lok Sabha election of 1984 as “oceanic tidal wave”. At the same time, it went on (*ABP*, 7 January, 1985) inciting the Bengali sentiments by apprehending “deprivation of
the Bengalis” in the dismissal of two prominent Bengali Congress leaders, Pranab Mukhopadhyay and Barkat Gani Khan Choudhury, in the proposed Union cabinet.

Contrary to the imageries articulated by the ‘bourgeois’ media, _Ganashakti_ focussed on the “positive efforts” of the government like the “improvements” in the rural industrialisation (_Ganashakti_, 15 July, 1977), ‘increase of wage’ in the tea industries (_Ganashakti_, 21 July, 1977) or “massive expansion” of small scale units in three years (_Ganashakti_, 4 September, 1980). At the same time, the ‘problem’ of the closed and sick industries emerged as one of the primary issues in its coverage (_Ganashakti_, 30 July, 1977; _Ganashakti_, 3 December, 1977; _Ganashakti_, 30 April, 1980). The editorials echoed the Front government’s concern over the sickness of major industries like jute, plantation and engineering and its effect on the industrialisation efforts of the state. The party newspaper covered with much importance the demands placed to the Centre by the state government of attending the sickness and cooperating in the establishment of new industrial projects. The ‘closure and sickness’ of industries emerged as one of the contentious issues in public debate in the 1980s with the Bengali media’s consistent coverage along with the articulation of the political parties.

From the beginning, _Ganashakti_ reiterated the Front government’s political commitment to recovering the democratic rights of the workers in the industrial sector as stated in the Left Front’s electoral manifesto in 1977. Thus, it highlighted the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu strongly supporting (_Ganashakti_, 9 July, 1978) the “legitimate demands and movements” of the workers and advising the industrialists to take a “realistic approach”. The editorial expressed (_Ganashakti_, 3 March, 1979) satisfaction in the “improved labour condition” in the state and “forced back out of the owner-groups by the united labour movement”. In the process of mediation, _Ganashakti_ sustained the pro-worker image of the Front government, strongly refuting the ‘allegation’ that labour unrest was the factor behind declining condition of the industries in the state. Contrary to the claims of the Opposition, _Ganashakti_, in the Lead, upheld (_Ganashakti_, 8 March, 1982) the ‘claim’ of the then Labour Minister, Krishnapada Ghosh, that the workdays lost due to strikes and lockouts had declined under the Front rule, compared to the previous Congress regime. _Ganashakti_’s representations manifested interesting features of inter-textual borrowing of the Front’s propaganda messages and newspaper texts. The mediation strategy prompted
the party newspaper joining the chore with the Front leadership in slamming the “distortion” in the big media’s representations about the Left Front government. The Front observed (Basu, 1997: 238-239):

“The big press has become habituated in distorting the views of the Left Front and targeting it...whenever we call strikes and bandhs for some reason they write of people’s difficulties. These papers do not write against price rise, unemployment, lockouts. But when the Left declare strikes on these issues they shout about mandays lost, factories closed, loss incurred due to the strike.”

Throughout the first decade of the Front rule, Ganashakti upheld the demands and movements of the trade unions with prime importance and projected the ‘sympathy’ of the Front government to their demands. The pro-worker stance reiterated the party newspaper’s projection of an alternative image of the Front government as against the articulation of the big ‘bourgeois’ media. The contending representations not only circulated diverse and opposing images of governance or different agenda for their targeted readers but also provided staple resources for the state politics on a daily basis. The political engagement of the Bengali press became much more prominent in the 1980s with its hype-making trend on issues like Centre-state relations or changing policies of the Left Front governments in industrialisation.

7.4 Centre-state Conflict: Setting the Centrestage

As noted in Chapter IV, the industrial situation in the state suffered a great setback in post-independence period due to a number of historical and political-economic factors. One of the oft-mentioned factors behind the industrial setback has been identified as the role of the Central governments’ policies affecting the eastern region. Vernacular media conformed to the allegation of ‘imbalance’ in Centre-state power relationship and protested in unison in the first few years of the Left Front rule. From 1979 onwards, the Front gradually accelerated its political battle against the ‘discrimination’ affecting the industrial development of West Bengal and placed the agenda at the centre of its rhetorical mobilisation. Ganashakti appropriated the spirit of the anti-Centre stand of the Front in its framing strategy with the conviction that the “central policies would strengthen the dominance of the large and monopoly capital in the Indian economy” (Ganashakti, 5 October, 1980). The relentless propaganda was built on the Centre’s “discriminatory policies” in establishing new industries in the state and “reluctance” in
acquisition of the sick and closed public units. As the state was suffering from the acute sickness of the traditional industries and closed public enterprises leading to declining output and employment ratio, the Front government demanded a pro-active role of the Centre in restoring the production and employment potential. *Ganashakti* emerged as one of the important sites of the political mobilisation against the central policies by its active engagement in constructing and nurturing the agenda. Rallying with the Left Front, it demanded (*Ganashakti*, 13 April, 1980) the Centre’s initiative as the ‘power of acquisition’ of the closed and sick industries fell within the purview of the Centre and propagated that in many cases, the industries were suffering from “artificial sickness”.

The Left Front government, in its first industrial policy, focussed on the advancement of the small and medium industries to ensure more ‘employment’. Though the small and cottage industry was listed in the State List, the Front alleged that the states depended on the Centre for raw materials (*Ganashakti*, 13 April, 1980; *Ganashakti*, 11 November, 1983). The licensing system required the states to acquire permission from the Centre in establishing big and heavy industries. The freight equalisation policy accentuated “history of deprivation” to the eastern states (*Ganashakti*, 18 May, 1983; *Ganashakti*, 28 May, 1983). All this meant the ‘domination’ of the Centre in the federal structure in the process of industrialisation that was vehemently opposed by the Left Front from the beginning. The battle reached its climax in the 1980s and *Ganashakti* spearheaded its propaganda role by attempting to mobilise public support against the Centre’s “dilly-dallying” or “step-motherly attitude” to the state and in favour of the Front government’s industrial efforts. It demanded “change in the situation” (*Ganashakti*, 28 May, 1980), echoing the Left Front’s political opposition against “discrimination”. At the same time, *Ganashakti* provided (*Ganashakti*, 28 May, 1980) wide coverage to the ‘success’ of the government in expanding the scope of small and cottage industries and the ‘efforts’ to establish industries like chemical and pharmaceutical, cement or petrochemical projects, inspite of the “Centre’s non-cooperation”.

As mentioned in the previous section, from early 1980s, *ABP* mellowed down its criticism against the role of the Centre in ‘obstructing’ industrial programmes in the state and tuned its coverage to expose the symbolic assertions in the Front’s anti-Centre rhetorical battle. The “inefficacy” of the state government superseded the fervour of the
anti-Centre hype in sidelining the debate from the leading space of front pages in its mediation strategy. It observed (ABP, 5 July, 1982) – “invoking the discriminatory attitude of the Centre, the complete explanation of this downfall cannot be made.” ABP rather held (Bhattacharya, 1984: 4) the deteriorating conditions of the basic infrastructures like power, roads, etc responsible for the decline and taunted at the political strategy of “blaming the Centre”. Since mid 1980s, ABP’s encoding strategy began to downplay the frame of provincialism reticent in the anti-Centre articulation that was previously shared with the Front government and gradually built up a strong disposition to cosmopolitanism or global citizenship. The position was further vindicated (ABP, 31 December, 2002) in its consistent positioning against “petti-Bengali narrow mindedness” in subsequent years.

In the emerging context, the party newspaper embarked on a different mode of propagandist role in negating the “slander campaign” (Ganashakti, 13 March, 1981) against the Left Front government and its industrialisation programmes. The state politics was stirred by the ‘claims’ and ‘counter-claims’ of the Front and its Opposition, including a section of the Bengali press, about the ‘declining condition’ of the industrial health of the state and the transfer of industrial investment to other states. Ganashakti held the Centre’s ‘policy’ and ‘discrimination’ wholly responsible for the “scanty investment” in the state. It gave an extensive coverage to the “non-availability of permit or licenses” from the Centre in establishing petrochemical, engineering, ship building and other industries, often rationalising the argument with statistical data to sustain the rhetorical battle in favour of the Front government. ABP and Bartaman held the state policy responsible for the deteriorating industrial conditions. The issue not only received hyped attention in media and state politics but also got considerable salience in terms of the Front’s political mobilisation. Along with the Front leadership, the party newspaper embroiled in a bitter conflict with the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ newspapers, especially ABP, on “kutsa” (slandering) on the industrial situation and the Left Front government in general. The pungency of the hostility was reflected in the caustic comments, sarcasm or antagonism expressed in the Ganashakti editorials and post-editorials. It described ABP as “the faithful nakeeb (one who is employed to announce the glory of one’s prince) of the vested interests and the reactionaries in the state” (Ganashakti, 3 February, 1980) or
lashed out at the “detestable journalism” (Ganashakti, 17 December, 1980), “satanic role” of the House (Nath, 1981: 2) or “record of yellow journalism” (Ganashakti, 13 February, 1985). The then CPI(M) State Secretary, Saroj Mukherjee, urged (1985: 4) the ‘party supporters’ not to believe in the “Left Front related news” of the “monopoly house-led newspapers” and “to verify” the news with that of published in Ganashakti and other Left papers. The media war vindicated the growth of the vernacular news media as an important political institution in West Bengal, integral to political processes and increasingly emerging as the site of political opinion-making and mobilisation.

As the Assembly election of 1982 approached the Front and the party newspaper heightened the campaign of “discrimination” against the state by projecting the Centre as “the main obstacle” in the industrialisation of the state (Ganashakti, 26 January, 1982). After coming to power for the second term in 1982, the Left Front geared its campaign against the Centre’s “economic blockade” against West Bengal as part of a “political conspiracy”. The then Finance Minister of the state, Dr. Ashok Mitra, strongly argued (1984) that the policy of depriving West Bengal from its due economic resources was political decision. The party newspaper vehemently criticised the “repeated rejection” of the Centre in granting permission to the Haldia Petrochemical project, Electronics Complex in Salt Lake, new infrastructural ventures, ship building project in Haldia, and funding the Bakreswar Thermal Project, arguing that the Centre was “dismantling” the scope of important industrial projects for the state economy. With the debate engulfing state politics industrial policies received dominant space in the party newspaper replacing the focus from agricultural reforms, particularly since 1983. During the climax period — January, 1983 to March 1985 — agricultural policies were covered in six days of Lead report, six editorials and two post-editorials in the party newspaper. Industrial policy, on the other hand, received nineteen days of Lead news, twenty seven editorials and five post-editorials. Of these, the issue of ‘discrimination’ of the Centre in industrial development of the state were covered in eight days of Lead news, twenty one editorials and one post-editorial.

The spinning of the battle in the pages of Ganashakti was based on incessant use of emotive framing like “extreme injustice”, “wrong planning”, “dillydallying” etc. imported from the lexicon of Front’s political campaign, and committed and provocative
assertions like “we demand”, “we oppose”, “raise your voice against injustice of the Centre” etc. As noted in Chapter IV, since 1983, the demand for reorganisation of the Centre-state relations became a political issue at the national level with the Left parties leading the dissent and organising regional political parties. Ganashakti representations consolidated the Front’s demand of “changing industrial and financial policies of the Centre in the interest of the states” and “abolition of policies satisfying vested interests” (Ganashakti, 13 July, 1982; Ganashakti, 20 February, 1983; Ganashakti, 24 April, 1983). The crusade received high-strung coverage in eight editorials and thirteen days of Lead news in Ganashakti during April–September, 1983 as the Front embarked on a state-wide movement against ‘Centre’s discrimination’ with a mass rally in the Brigade Parade Ground on 20 September and a bangla bandh (All-Bengal strike) on 28 September. The post-editorials, during this period, were contributed by the top leadership of the CPI(M) like Saroj Mukherjee, Manoronjon Roy⁷, Dinesh Roy⁸, who justified and mobilised the demand of “more power to the states”. The party newspaper emerged as one of the important constituents of the Front’s anti-Centre campaign network, framing and priming the debate to its heightened level. As the debate unfolded into its peak form, the editorials sharpened the critique and appropriated the language of action like “to force the Centre into action” or “(we need) united and consistent struggle”. Ganashakti gave wide coverage to the youth front’s much-hyped rally, ‘Salt Lake to Haldia’ on 14 September, 1985, against the Centre’s discrimination or their call to build ‘Bakreswar with blood’ and published series of articles on the programme.⁹ The rhetoric generated around such programmes, on the other hand, was immediately discarded in the ‘bourgeois’ media’s encoding strategy. Ridiculing the ‘Salt Lake to Haldia padayatra’ (Salt Lake to Haldia march) of the youth front as “padayatrar utsob” (festival of march) (Ghosh, 1985c: 4) ABP reduced the whole move to an attempt of the leadership to keep the youth “under control”. Drawing on a popular Bengali idiomatic expression – khuror kol¹⁰, ABP post-editorial scoffed at (Ghosh, 1985c: 4) the ‘repetitive’ claims and slogans of the Front around ‘number of employment’ to be ensured in its industrial enterprises in such campaigns. The sarcasm reached its peak when Bakreswar Thermal Plant was finally implemented by the state government with the help of Japanese grant. The op-ed title
reminded (Gupta, 2001: 4) with satirical note: “The Bakreswar Project has come into being with the Japanese loan, not by blood.”

*Aajkal*, however, shared the intensity of the political agitation by rallying with the Front’s discontent against the Centre’s role during this period. Along with the party newspaper, it joined (*Aajkal*, 7 June, 1986; *Aajkal*, 8 June, 1986) the allegations of the Front leadership and Ministers that the Congress-led Central government was “provoking” the industrialists to not invest in West Bengal. The editorial strongly objected to the comments of the then Union Finance Minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, that the industrialists would even go to the North Pole, but not invest in West Bengal. Drawing the instances of central policies obstructing the state’s industrial development it accused (*Aajkal*, 9 June, 1986) the Minister of diverting the attention from the “inactivity” of the Centre and criticised the “absence of sympathy to West Bengal”. Inspite of its critical stand against the Left Front government’s industrial policies, *Bartaman* also blamed (Ghosh, 1987b: 4) the Centre for its “injustice” and “negligence” to the state. The post-ed article sustaining the spirit of provincial chauvinism, reminded (Ghosh, 1987b: 4) that the Bengalis did not tolerate “excessive domination” of the Centre.

Thus, it is found that, on the one hand, the coverage of the Centre-state tussle fractured the perceived solidarity of the Bengali ‘bourgeois’ press on occasions and on the other, it reflected transitory solidarity between the ruling Front and a section of vernacular media in articulating a strong regional identity. The framing of the tension also exposed the nuances of agenda-building strategies of vernacular media in sustaining the hype around confrontational politics anchored in strong propagandist modes. In the process, the Bengali press gradually strengthened its agency role in political mobilisation and emerged as ‘insider’ in political processes, going beyond its traditional watchdog role.

### 7.5 Second Left Front Regime: ‘Shifts’ in the Industrial Policy

Since the second term of the Left Front government, state politics was greatly agitated vis-à-vis the ‘shifts’ in the Left Front’s industrialisation programmes and the ‘deviations’ from the Front’s proclaimed political-ideological commitments. In the context of increasing industrial stagnation due to lack of investments in the state, the second Left Front government (1982-87) undertook certain policy decisions aiming at two broad
objectives – restoration of the existing industries from closure and sluggish growth and ensuring new investments in the state. The policy strategies triggered intense debates both within and outside the Front. The Bengali press pursued a pro-active role in spinning this debate by trying to maneuver public opinion with their own modes of legitimisation or marginalisation of issues. Framing of the ‘shifts’ involved their attempts to steer the public gaze to the issues in selective ways and in the process of negotiation, the Bengali press, to repeat, shedding off its observer role, emerged as one of the key players in the political battle. On a later occasion, hinting at this media activism, well-known Bengali writer, Debes Roy, commented (2000: 4) in a post-editorial in Aajkal: “Bengali press has initiated the politics of news in covering news of politics.”

7.5.1 Debates on ‘Sickness’ of Industries

As noted in Chapter IV, the increasing industrial meltdown led to serious crisis in the industrial prospect of the state with declining rate of production and employment. The second Left Front government prioritised the recovery of the sick industries. From the beginning, the Front government propagated a vigorous pro-public sector policy in industrialisation and accordingly, opted for state support to the sick and closed industries. It demanded acquisition of these industries by the Central government and intensified political debate drawing the “instances of the Centre’s ‘negligence’ to the declining industries” like wagon, engineering, etc. Since the second Left Front regime the Front gradually pitched its mobilisation high against the Centre’s policy of ‘de-notification’ or acquisition of sick and closed industries by private capital. At the same time, it reviewed its own stand on acquisition and embarked on adopting some important changes in its policy throughout 1980s. The Front government decided to handover the ‘management’ of some of the government-owned sick industries to private enterprises, changing its earlier focus on state acquisition or nationalisation of closed and sick industries that created serious dissensions within the Front itself.\textsuperscript{11} The debates over increasing sickness in industries and the battle with the Congress-led Central government unfolded certain interesting traits of thematic framing in Bengali newspapers’ mediation strategies. Pursuant to a pro-private capital posturing, \textit{ABP}, from the beginning, had emphatically expressed (\textit{ABP}, 20 July, 1982) its objection to the state
government’s “wrong policy” of ‘nationalisation’ of sick industries and was convinced that such decision was a product of “surrender to the pressure put by the labourers”. Accordingly, *ABP* appreciated (*ABP*, 13 August, 1982) the government’s thoughts to handover the management of some of the closed industries to the private capital as the “dawn of sensibility” or “a move to the right direction” (*ABP*, 2 September, 1982) and hoped (*ABP*, 13 August, 1982) that the government could realise the “advantages” of private management. It propagated (*ABP*, 13 August, 1982) that by the “inviolable rule of economy”, certain industries might face “sunset” and the government should try to implement that “natural” rule with the help of a free, unhindered economy.

*Aajkal* broadly went along (*Aajkal*, 26 June, 1986) the Front’s argument of the ‘Centre’s discrimination’ as important factor behind de-industrialisation in the state and “absence of investment” in the traditional industries like tea, jute, coal. However, it reacted to the decision of handover with much caution and raised questions about the rationality of the “conditions” put by the government on employee restructuraction. In the editorial, titled metaphorically – ‘*Shilper Pinjrapole*’12 (iron cage of industry), *Aajkal* did not hide its uneasiness about the “condition” of maintaining the “unnecessary workforce” (*Aajkal*, 22 June, 1983) in the acquired industries. The framing of the issue in *Aajkal* gradually unfolded (*Aajkal*, 22 May, 1981; *Aajkal*, 23 June, 1983; *Aajkal*, 6 December, 1983) the nuances in policy making by attracting greater attention to the intra-Front debates on the decision of nationalisation or handover of the closed and sick industries to the private management, especially articulating the ‘dissent’ of the small partners of the Front. The coverage of ‘dissent’ exposed the ‘tension’ within the Left Front over industrialisation programme, negating the imagery of collective decision-making, which reached its culmination in the last few years of the Front regime. *Aajkal* also covered the allegations of the then General Secretary of the INTUC, G Ramanujam, in the front page in this context. Addressing the 21st West Bengal State Conference of the INTUC in 1985, Ramanujam held (*Aajkal*, 19 February, 1985) the Front government’s “wrong application of Marxism in the industrial enterprises” and the resultant “conflict between the labourers and the owners” responsible for industrial sickness and unrest. In addressing the issue of sickness and closure in industrial sector, *Aajkal* insisted on (Ghosh, 1987c: 4) locating the
“real disease and the proper cause of the disease” and reminded the Front leadership that the crisis was evident in the socialist countries as well.

Along with its own mass organisations, the Front relied greatly on the penetration of the media in mobilising the agenda of ‘discrimination’ of the Centre and the party newspaper was embedded into this network of communication as an integral constituent. While *Ganashakti* gave the campaign sustenance by its repeated high-pitched coverage, it also provided (*Ganashakti*, 28 June, 1982) a different angularity to the mediation by focusing on the ‘number’ of sick companies acquired by the state government since 1980 and the “profitable performance” of some of these enterprises. The strategy reflected attempts to rationalising the state acquisition and projecting the “positive efforts” of the Front government. In the context of the handover of the management, *Ganashakti* gave a restricted coverage to the ‘shift’ in policy, limiting its comment to general observation like “important decision” of the Left Front and stressing (*Ganashakti*, 6 December, 1983) the “conditions” put by the Front Committee like “security of job” to be maintained in such cases. It, however, did not engage in attending the essence of this departure from the Front’s earlier commitment or the intra-Front dissensions on this decision.

From the beginning, as against *ABP*’s claim that labour trouble was leading to sickness and closure, *Ganashakti* subscribed to (*Ganashakti*, 16 February, 1985) the Front leaders’ argument that “unlimited greed of profit” of a group of owners was one of the reasons for the growing sickness of the industries and demanded the Centre’s intervention in the problem. The Front government was vocal about the crises in traditionally important industries in West Bengal like jute, engineering, wagon, tea and strongly urged the Centre to acquire the sick enterprises in these industries. For example, one of the oft-quoted demands of the Left Front was nationalisation of jute industry to curb the monopoly of a few industrialists in the industry that found consistent coverage in the party newspaper. Throughout 1985, the Front and its trade union organisations campaigned that the crisis in wagon industry was “planned” (*Ganashakti*, 18 May, 1985) and demanded the Centre’s intervention. *Ganashakti* substantiated the Front government’s argument that “corruption, inefficient management, fund diversion to other states/industries” (*Ganashakti*, 24 June, 1983) were the main problems of the sick industries and strongly supported the government’s “refusal to the proposal of block closure in jute industry by
the owners” (Ganashakti, 6 July, 1982). It cited (Ganashakti, 11 November, 1983) the survey of the Reserve Bank of India to substantiate the argument that “inefficient management” was responsible for sickness “in ninety five per cent of cases”.

As mentioned in Chapter IV, the Opposition and many other observers attributed (Kohli, 1991: 127) militant trade unionism and consequent industrial disputes as the major cause of the gradual industrial decline of the state. ABP strongly upheld the ‘allegation’ and located the ‘lack of investment’ in the rising trends of industrial disputes in the state and the ‘militant movements’ of the trade union front, which was, on occasions, shared by Aajkal. The dominant coverage of these media houses against trade union militancy was built on a self-righteous indignation that provoked a threat perception associated with frustration or anxiety over the slow pace of industrial development, especially to the urban and semi-urban middle-class population. There is no denying the fact that incessant coverage of the labour troubles and harping on its negative ‘effect’ by the ‘bourgeois’ media gave the issue a long-standing sustenance in the public agenda since 1980s. The concern over hostile environment in industrial units due to labour-owner disputes became problematic for the Front government as well in the subsequent years. Inclination of the Bengali press to emotive framing of the issue broke the limits of ‘routine’ or ‘objective’ reporting, even in hard news, to appropriate the genres of spin doctoring and in the process, was able to generate some opposing schemas, catering different segments of the readers.

As noted in the previous section, the Left Front government expressed its strong intention in securing workers’ democratic rights in industries from its inception. The Front government amended the Trade Union Act, 1926 to establish trade unions as ‘bargaining agents’ in industrial units and promised to “give maximum benefits to the workers under the existing statutes and arrangements” (Basu, 1997: 82). Accordingly, both the Front and the party newspaper upheld the ‘rationality’ of the movements of the workers in securing their “democratic rights”. During the first three years of the Left Front rule (1977-80) the party newspaper strongly supported the workers’ strikes in the jute, printing or engineering industries, holding the owners responsible for the decaying situation and gave it a day to day coverage.14 Ganashakti assured (Ganashakti, 10 October, 1983) the supporters/readers that the government was “sympathetic” to the movements of the
workers against the “whims” of the owners. It stood (Ganashakti, 3 March, 1979) in favour of “united trade union movement” and claimed that intervention of the Front government “in favour of the labourers” had reduced the industrial disputes and brought “peace” in the industrial situation. The ‘claim’ was, however, discarded by ABP and Bartaman. While the dominant coverage contested the ‘negative images’ of trade union movement in general, Ganashakti as well highlighted (Ganashakti, 19 January, 1985) the “strong message” of the Chief Minister in the Lead that “any attempt to disrupt the healthy environment of the industry in the state by creating trouble would not be tolerated by the state government”. The Chief Minister mentioned (Ganashakti, 19 January, 1985) especially that the government would not allow “gherao and any kind of indiscipline”. The repeated ‘warning’ of the Chief Minister against any ‘chaos’ in the trade union movements was specially covered in Aajkal (Aajkal 4 March, 1985) as well. The ‘bourgeois’ press fitted this ‘warning’ of the Chief Minister as a ‘message’ to the ‘conservative’ section of the trade union front, who believed in militant movement. The representations of the ‘message’ gradually developed into the hardliners-versus-pragmatists frame in the mediation strategy of the ‘bourgeois’ media, especially in ABP.

Amidst the claims and counter-claims on ‘sickness’ in industries a delegation of the newly-elected Congress M.P.s from Bengal visited the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, to discuss the problems of sick and closed public enterprises in West Bengal. ABP covered (ABP, 18 May, 1985) the “frustration” of the delegation in the Lead news noting that “the Prime Minister did not show interest about rejuvenation of sick industry”, rather expressed his “interest” about new investment only. However, in a subsequent editorial, ABP immediately pronounced its disapprobation of such ‘effort’ of the M.P.s to continue with the “subsidy-fed inefficiency” in industries. The editorial expressed (ABP, 21 May, 1984) relief that the new Central government had made “a primary plan of freedom by breaking the achalayatan” (juggernaut) of economy. ABP was emphatic in its ideological commitment to neo-liberal economy and did not conceal (ABP, 13 August, 1982) its conviction – “permanent public management necessarily means losses.” In critiquing the “economic proposals” favouring “nationalisation” in the election manifestoes of the CPI(M) or other Left parties on the eve of the Lok Sabha election in
1984, *ABP* validated (*ABP*, 1 December, 1984) its position against state-controlled economy:

“...in these statements, predominance of showy speech is more to be found than pragmatism...what is needed is complete cooperation with the individual, private, even the international industrialists-businessmen in the interest of economic development and efficiency... (There is) no necessity of unnecessary control or useless proposal of nationalisation...(What is) needed is a competition-based industrialisation programme.”

In tune with this supposition, *ABP* was enthusiastic about the inauguration of the Special Economic Zone in Falta, the first of its kind in the state, which was conceived as a regulation-free trade zone. *ABP* welcomed (*ABP*, 12 October, 1984) it as “the road to prosperity” and as “a life-saving enterprise” in the “stationery” industrial situation of the state.

This kind of linear messages, dominant in *ABP*’s construction, of a grand narrative of ‘efficiency-based’ neo-liberal and competitive economy as ideal was contested with counter-claims of the party newspaper. Throughout 1980s, *Ganashakti* went on nurturing a counter-narrative of state-led economy with emphasis on nationalisation, sourced from its socialistic commitments and posed against privatised unregulated economy. However, both of the contending narratives generally underplayed the scope of heterogeneity within the ‘grand’ ones and accordingly, marginalised a number of crucial issues/dimensions in encoding the debate.

**7.5.2 Joint Venture: The Bone of Contention**

The industrial policy strategies of the Left Front government signalled a crucial turn in the mid 1980s with the approval by the Front, of ‘joint venture’ in industrial investments, evoking great debates on the ‘deviations’ of the Front government from its political-ideological commitments to public sector economy. The trade union front and a section of the Leftists, including the Front partners, showed strong disapproval of the decision and advocated for public investment in setting up of new industries. The CPI(M) and its partners in the Front debated over the ‘context’ and ‘compulsions’ of such disjunction in policy and the polemical battle uncovered the intra-party and intra-Front divisions on the politics of economic reform.¹⁵ The CPI(M) leadership vindicated (Ranadive, 1986: 120) the ‘shift’ as a “tactical move to combat immediate attacks” or “economic blockade” and
not as “a desertion of the fundamental strategy”. The ‘tactical’ move also unveiled a
tussle between the hardliners and the pragmatists within the CPI(M) and the Front. The
joint venture policy of the Front government opened up a vibrant space of mediated
politics, exemplifying an interface of the Bengali press and political actors in debates and
constructing judgments on industrial and economic reforms.

From the beginning, ABP welcomed (ABP, 20 April, 1985) the Front government’s joint
sector policy as a “logical” and “very important decision” and covered (ABP, 26 April,
1985) specially the “consent” of the CITU, the trade union front of the CPI(M), on joint
venture in WEBEL to underplay any ‘dissent’ within Front. As the state government
decided to go for joint venture in the Electronics industry, it wrote (ABP, 20 April, 1985),
hinting at and legitimising the ‘ideological departure’: “It is a matter of hope that the Left
Front government did not hide its face in the quicksand of theory like the camel in the
situation of crisis; it has taken the proper path in solving the crisis.”

Ganashakti preferred to be limited to the ‘tactical’ dimension of the shift and legitimised
the decision in the context of the “compulsion” of private collaboration “in the changing
context”. However, its coverage of the repeated requests of the Chief Minister to the
industrialists “to build up joint ventures” and “individual responsibility” in
industrialisation in the front pages confirmed the departure in the Front’s political
campaign on the public-versus-private economy debate which was earlier tuned with a
strong choice for the public sector. The party newspaper, in rationalising the departure,
mostly quoted the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, defending the decision and explaining
the ‘context’ of the ‘shift’. He commented (Ganashakti, 2 June, 1985): “Whatever be the
individual politics, we have to work together for the interest of the country.” On the
‘necessity’ of joint sector, he argued (Ganashakti, 29 June, 1985):

“Till there is capitalism in the country, and that cannot be changed, what will we do as the state
government? We cannot turn the state into a desert. That is why, we have to go for joint venture
with the private institutions. However, this does not mean we are against the public sector.”

The joint sector policy created much uproar in the state politics as the Left Front
experienced strong resistance from within, especially from the CPI. Aajkal gave a wide
coverage to the ‘dissent’ of the CPI from the beginning. It reported (Aajkal, 10
December, 1985) that the Central Executive Committee of the CPI had adopted a
resolution strongly opposing the Front government’s joint venture policy as “misdirected”. The Lead news highlighted (Aajkal, 10 December, 1985) the disparaging note of the resolution that “this new industrial policy was adopted only to achieve some temporary gains” and it was “not congruous to the programmes of the Left Front”. The debate reached its height with the signing of the most publicised contract between the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation and the RPG Group to set up Haldia Petrochemicals, on 22 May, 1985. ABP hailed (ABP, 25 May, 1985) the decision of the Front government as “a firm step”. It was emphatic in its propagation of such joint ventures and took a visible stand in interpreting it as “pragmatic step” on different occasions, completely negating the ‘ideological’ implications of such decisions for the Left government. Thus, it concluded (ABP, 25 May, 1985): “It is irrelevant to discuss whether this change denotes a change in the party idealism. But, more the separation of the party and the government, better it is for the state.”

Ganashakti placed the news in the front page as six-column Lead and reported the event visibly in an informative tone, avoiding any emotive framing. Quite interestingly, an unprecedented convergence was seen in the editorials of Ganashakti and ABP as both used the same expression “firm step” as titles in evaluating the decision of joint venture in Haldia Petrochemical (ABP, 25 May, 1985; Ganashakti, 26 May, 1985). Ganashakti advanced the argument that this project should be recognised as a “national project” (Ganashakti, 26 May, 1985) as it would benefit the whole eastern region. While Aajkal was prompt in projecting the intra-Front dissensions on joint venture or stand of the Front partners, it nonetheless did not support (Chakraborty, 1985: 4.) the objections of the CPI to the “efforts of Jyoti Basu”. Rallying with the spirit of ABP and Ganashakti, senior political correspondent of Aajkal, Prithwish Chakraborty, demolished (1985: 4) the argument of the then CPI General Secretary, Rajeswar Rao, as “shariyati ain” (shariyat law) of communism in his article. Appraising the “pragmatism of “Jyoti Basu’s government”, he termed (Chakraborty, 1985: 4) the new industrial policy of collaboration with the private capital as “return of the conscience”, hinting at the ‘shift’ in the Front’s primary positioning against private capital. This kind of spinning fitted well with the headline – “Joint Venture: Chief Minister snubbed the CPI” (Aajkal, 31 December, 1985), which highlighted the advocacy of Jyoti Basu of joint sector in the public meeting
of the 12th Party Congress of the CPI(M). Though Basu “did not mention the name of CPI” in his address, Aajkal’s narrative immediately ‘identified’ the target in his address. The party newspaper also expressed discontent over the Front partners’ ‘objections’ against the CPI(M) on such decisions of collaboration with latent accent. Ganashakti, on a later occasion, referred back to the comments made by the then Industry Minister of the First Left Front government in a question-hour session in the Assembly, where he talked of providing “better substitute” for the entrepreneurs and investors for industrialisation in the state. The post-editorial of Ganashakti, in responding to the Front partners’ dissent on collaboration with the private investors during the seventh Left Front regime, referred (Chakraborty, 2008: 4) Kanailal Bhattacharya as “Industry and Commerce Minister from the Forward Bloc” indicating his ‘party identity’ and disapproving his previously mentioned ‘objection’ by saying whether he “was wrong” at that time.

It can be mentioned that despite evident differences in positioning, since mid 1980s, the Bengali press, including the party newspaper broadly shared the conviction of the Left Front government in bringing ‘changes’ in industrial policies towards achieving newer investments through greater private investment and collaboration. The ‘bourgeois’ press gradually built up a grand narrative of capital-intensive industrialisation based on private investment in their respective ‘friendly’ or ‘adversarial’ encoding strategies that occasionally converged with the changing discourses of the Front governments’ economic reforms and party newspaper’s ‘tactical’ positioning as well.16

An important feature in ABP’s mediation of joint sector policy was reflected (Banerjee, 1985: 4) in its attempt to dissociate government and the Front/party by segregating the “Marxian conservatives” inside the Front and “pragmatists” in the government like “Jyoti Basu or Industry Minister”. This kind of framing broadly relied on personalisation of politics associated with a projection of a specific image of leadership, which was integral to the mediation strategies of the ‘bourgeois’ newspapers. In doing so ABP, despite its evident reservations against the Left Front government in general, applauded Jyoti Basu’s ‘efforts’ in industrialisation and observed (Banerjee, 1985: 4): “It is undeniable that in the last eight years the Left Front government, inspite of its failures in some specific areas, it has tried its best to increase ‘social benefit’ for the people.” In a way, this general observation of ABP converged well with Ganashakti’s claim (Ganashakti, 22 June, 1985)
that “inspite of the injustice of the Centre and obstacles the advancements in the state in last eight years surpassed the twenty eight years rule of the Congress (I)”. In dissociating ‘pragmatists’ from the ‘conservatives’ ABP upheld (ABP, 16 May, 1985) Jyoti Basu as “a wise administrator” who “in the interest of development” had thought of cooperation with the private enterprises “inspite of theoretical differences”. The editorial concluded (ABP, 16 May, 1985) that “this seeming departure from the so-called ultra-conservative Leftism probably resulted from their eight years’ of experience in administration.” Aajkal joined (Aajkal, 26 December, 1983) the bandwagon with ABP in brand making of leadership by projecting Jyoti Basu, as “pragmatic” and “sympathetic” to the industrialists. The trait of ‘pragmatism’ found expression, according to Aajkal (Aajkal, 4 December, 1985), in Jyoti Basu’s insistence on “commonsense”, as he argued that the “teachings of Marx and Lenin” were to be “implemented in West Bengal” and that was to be done looking at the “situation of West Bengal”. The framing of ABP and Aajkal reflected a unique convergence in representations in terms of language, mode or symbolism in circulating the images like hardliners or pragmatists. Thus, like ABP, Aajkal also discovered (Aajkal, 31 December, 1986) “the best traits of pragmatism” in Jyoti Basu and found that it had been a very difficult exercise for him to convince the “kottor (ultra-conservative) Marxists in his party”. It went (Aajkal, 31 December, 1986) to the extent of saying that Jyoti Basu was going to “make the impossible possible” and the “glorious days of industries in the state” were “coming back”.

This kind of spin-doctoring of a particular image of a Left administrator or of a specific policy of the Left Front government beyond the party logos, to fit into a ‘brand’ or readymade schemata of a predominantly neo-liberal media was, however, strongly contested by the Left leadership. Thus, in an interview with the ABP correspondent, Jyoti Basu declined (ABP, 14 June, 1985) to describe himself as “pragmatic” or denied of any “deviation from the Marxist ideals” but defined his government’s position on joint sector policy as “tactical” posturing. The debate over ‘pragmatism’ was attended in the front page in Ganashakti as well that covered the comments made by Jyoti Basu in the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce Meet. It quoted (Ganashakti, 29 June, 1985) Jyoti Basu responding to the debate: “Some are describing me as ‘pragmatist Marxist’. What does it mean? Marxism implies a combination of theory and practice.” He argued (Ganashakti,
29 June, 1985) that the Front government could not bring down the state into a “desert” and that concern was leading to ‘collaboration’ with the private enterprises. The overpersonalisation of leadership by placing the leader ‘beyond the party’ was a consistent trait to be found in ABP’s framing mode, even in the later phases of the Front regime. As discussed in Chapter VI, the brand making strategy reached its heightened phase during the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes in projecting the image of the then Chief Minister Budhdhadev Bhattacharjee vis-á-vis the “conservatives” of the Left Front. Ganashakti, on the other hand, understated the role of the individual in the making of policy strategies and concentrated more on the projection of the party and the Front as an integrated whole. The disparate tenors of encoding of the Bengali press were not only reflected in the issue-based mediations, as was in the case of joint sector policy, but manifested also in thematic generalisations around industrialisation policies or political-ideological posturing as a whole.

Since the second term of the Left Front government the mainstream Bengali newspapers gradually built up a narrative around the ‘conflict’ between the trade union leadership representing the ‘conservative’ sections of the Front and the then ‘pragmatist’ Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu. In the context of an intensive focus on industrialisation with the help of the private investment, ABP raised (ABP, 7 August, 1985) apprehensions that “Jyoti Basu’s effort” might be obstructed by ‘strikes’ or militant movements of the trade unions, when West Bengal was experiencing “industrial enterprise after a long period”. Though in a much milder tone, Aajkal also shared (Aajkal, 26 December, 1983) this presupposition that strikes were not “favourable for industrial development” and the right to strike did not mean “irresponsible behaviour”. Preceding the Assembly election of 1982, Aajkal published a series of articles on The Five Years of the Left Front, assessing the first Front government’s performance in different sectors of governance. Addressing the deteriorating conditions of the industrial development in the state, the authors mainly identified ‘technological problems’ and ‘central policies’ responsible for the steady industrial decline. The assessment, however, reflected (Bay and Chattopadhyay, 1982: 1) a critical note on the “right not to work” enjoyed by “a section of the labourers” and the “reckless behaviour” of the trade unions, “allowed by the Left Front” contributing in the deterioration. As the criticism against labour unrest gained ground in the public
deliberations, the Front government, especially the Chief Minister was seen to address the allegations in public meetings. *Aajkal* gave (*Aajkal*, 4 March 1985) prominence to Jyoti Basu’s repeated directive to the trade unions to not indulge in “lawlessness” and his ‘warning’ that it would not be tolerated by the government. In one editorial, it apprehended that the ‘promises’ of the Chief Minister might be spoiled by the trade union leaders. *Aajkal* observed (*Aajkal*, 31 December, 1986):

“The Chief Minister has promised the businessmen and the industrialists of restrained behaviour of the labour movement. But, will those ultra-conservative leaders for whom politics is the profession and inciting the labourers is the passion, pay heed to his words?”

*Aajkal* found (*Aajkal*, 31 December, 1986) the Chief Minister’s ‘promise’ “assuring” for the industrialists and articulated their ‘relief’ that “at last the Left Front government was going to pursue a healthy labour policy”. *Ganashakti* countered the “disparaging remarks” of the ‘bourgeois’ press against the ‘militancy’ of the trade union leadership by projecting the ‘responsible’ image of the leaders. On the occasion of the seventh anniversary of the Left Front government, it upheld (*Ganashakti*, 24 June, 1984) this image with the placing of the trade union leadership’s call to the workers to come forward in “saving the industries” along with “pursuing the movement for increase in wages” as the Lead news.

The mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media’s framing also reflected a regular barracking against the ‘conservatives’ within the Front who expressed dissent against collaboration with the private capital. *ABP*’s strong disapproval of the Front partner, CPI’s dissent on joint sector policy found a unique visual mode of representation. On 26 May, 1985, it published (*ABP*, 29 May, 1985) a picture of graffiti as part of the Front’s campaign in the corporation election in favour of the CPI candidate. It appealed “to vote for Purnendu Sengupta”, the candidate of the Left Front which is taking enterprise in building the Haldia petrochemical industry”. The picture went with the unusually long caption – “As a party CPI is opposed to joint venture with the private collaboration. But in the corporation election the Left front has made graffiti in North Calcutta in favour of that party glorifying joint venture.” *ABP* went on (*ABP*, 29 May, 1985) extending its sarcasm that in the corporation election, Haldia Petrochemical was the “popular agenda” and the CPI was in an “awkward situation” unable to negate it.
7.5.3 The Debate on Automation

As noted in Chapter IV, the debate over computerisation in industries stirred the state politics during the second Left Front government. The Front showed its reservations in allowing the computerisation of production and services in the industrial sector, apprehending its possible negative impact on employment. *Ganashakti* covered (*Ganashakti*, 14 January, 1985) this anxiety in a special article, ‘*bekar bonam computer*’ (Unemployed versus Computer) that described the Central government’s policy of computerisation as “a permanent arrangement to keep the unemployed jobless in the name of science”. It strongly criticised such efforts as integral part of the new industrial policy proposed by the Rajiv Gandhi-led government. *ABP*’s coverage began to address the issue of mechanisation much before the debate actually started and manifested its strong preference for automation prioritising its own vision of modernisation of industries. As early as 1982, it advocated (*ABP*, 15 December, 1982) for computerisation as “the symbol of progress” and appreciated that “Jyoti Basu had acknowledged the ‘necessity’ of technological modernisation in industries”. The propagation of *ABP* in favour of automation strengthened an evident filtering by paying scant attention to the ‘dissent’ of the Front partners in its news coverage. Accordingly, the coverage also marginalised Jyoti Basu’s own submission in the State Committee Conference of the CPI(M) in 1986 (Basu, 2011: 129) that “automation would necessarily obstruct new recruitment.” Amidst the heated debate, the then Industry Minister expressed his favourable stand for computerisation and *ABP* promptly welcomed (*ABP*, 2 February, 1984) it as “*bodhodoyer pratik*” (symbol of rising sensibility). *Aajkal*’s coverage stepped into the political deliberation over computerisation with a comparatively balancing note. While it found (*Aajkal*, 20 August, 1984) “unanimity” of the then Union Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, and Jyoti Basu on computerisation regarding “principle”, *Aajkal* did not ignore Jyoti Basu’s reservations “in terms of implementation”. At the same time, contradicting the projected image of a united Left Front, it focussed on the contentions within the Front, especially in the CPI(M), on the pros and cons of computerisation in industries. *Aajkal*’s coverage located (*Aajkal*, 26 December, 1985) the tussle in the clash of opinion among two ‘visible’ camps in the party – one in favour of ‘allowing’ automation and computerisation and the other negating this stand and
“identifying the former as ‘revisionist’ line”. Its framing of the issue was mainly based on (Aajkal, 30 December, 1985) the “intense debate” in the 12th Party Congress of the CPI(M), which, in the end called for “united movement of the Left Democratic forces against the new economic policy of computerisation in industries”.

The automation issue received intense attention during 1984-85 as the Left trade unions campaigned vehemently against automation policy of the Central government. The joint forum of different trade unions, including CITU, AITUC, called a state-wide industrial strike on 12 September, 1985, protesting against automation in banks or the insurance sectors. The movement against automation, especially the strike was vehemently criticised (ABP, 6 August, 1985) as “illogical” and (ABP, 12 August, 1985) “self-contradictory politics” by ABP. The editorial denounced (ABP, 13 August, 1985) the apprehensions of the trade unions on loss of employment as “baseless” and tried to convince that “in the end, it (machine) is a means of employment”.

7.6 Concluding Observations

The competitive coverage of the Bengali press of the Left Front government’s industrial policies generated a number of contending narratives in the state politics in the first decade of the Front rule. It is evident from the mainstream Bengali media’s representations that vernacular press as a major narrator-mediator of these policy debates increasingly intervened into the core of political process. The mediation strategies strengthened the agenda-building potentials of the Bengali media providing important feedback both for public deliberations and policy making processes. As noted, the coverage of industrial policy strategies often appreciated the tenors of provincial political sentiment, with periodic articulation of Bengali middle class chauvinism. The Bengali press relied on deliberate framing of the policy debates to create certain hype-zones by priming issues and thereby reducing certain others to ancillary or marginal status in public deliberations. Thus, the Centre’s ‘discrimination’, joint sector policies or automation got prime space in industrial coverage of these dailies, and development of small and medium sector, rural industries received limited attention. However, choice of ‘hypes’ or ‘zones of silence’ by the media was indicative of its perceptual framework which provided the audience with, what Robert Entman terms as, ready-made schematas.
The agenda-building role also shed light on interesting areas of convergence and divergence between the media agenda and that of the Front government and an ever-expanding space of media war as well. The encoding process gave birth to certain grand narratives around industrialisation programme based on ideological and/or commercial rationale of the Houses and reflected certain cursory and/or hidden narratives implicit in the images, symbols and codes of the representations.

Mediation as a process involves both direct and latent exercise of power, framed in dynamic terms. Accordingly, the Bengali press emerged as an important constituent of state politics in critically interpreting and thereby steering public debates on industrialisation programmes from the very beginning. As manifested from the instances, in constructing the images of governance with the help of numerous representations the Bengali mainstream press played its programming role\(^\text{18}\) that was crucial for sustaining the debates on industrialisation in the public mind. The role became much more important and visible in the second phase of industrialisation which occurred in the last decade of the Left Front regime. It was when the process of industrial policy making superseded other areas of governance reforms in terms of primary focus in the Left Front’s agenda of economic reforms as well as in public debates. The next chapter deals with the process of encoding of the ‘great leap forward’ of industrialisation in the Bengali language press during the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes.

Notes

1. Manuel Castells argued (2011: 156) that media “framing proceeds by the structure and form of the narrative and by the selective use of sounds and images”.

2. Referring to ‘partisan’ media model, Manuel Castells argued (2011: 195): “They target ideologically specific audiences interested in having their views confirmed rather than being informed from alternative sources.”

3. The ‘link’ was activated in the public discourse as a distinct slogan of the seventh Left Front regime. The public information campaign of the Front government extensively circulated the rhetorical slogan during this period.

4. The history of freedom movement in undivided Bengal, for example, manifested a strong ‘dissident’ legacy against the domination of the central leadership of the Indian National Congress. The political-cultural tradition of Bengali chauvinism continued in post-
independence period and fostered the traits of radical anti-Centre politics in subsequent years.

5. Both these characters – *suorani* and *duorani* are quite popular in Bengali children stories and are widely used as metaphors on different occasions.

6. The policy planned to emphasise rural industrialisation and restore the traditional cottage and small industry units under the departmental assistance of West Bengal Handicrafts Development Corporation.

7. Manoranjan Roy was a well-known trade union leader and former General Secretary of the CITU.

8. Dinesh Roy was a leader of the Krishak Sabha.

9. The student and youth organisations of the Left Front were given a leading role in the campaign to organise meetings, marches, blood donation camps, cultural functions like film shows for money-raising purposes, to mobilise the public opinion against the discrimination of the Congress-led Central government.

10. The expression, taken from a popular Bengali poem, ‘Khuror Kol’ by Sukumar Roy, denotes the elusive promises made by someone.

11. The Left Front Committee, in its meeting on 26 November, 1983, gave assent to such handover with the condition that there would be no retrenchment and security of job should be ensured by the owner.

12. The Bengali word ‘*pinjrapole*’ refers to the iron cage of disabled cattle or a veterinary asylum. Here, the expression was metaphorically used to imply the sick industries.

13. On the 40th anniversary of *Ganashakti* in 2007, interpreting the ‘role’ of the party newspaper, the editorial reiterated (*Ganashakti*, 3 January, 2007): “If propaganda is not combined with movement then the political foundation is not strengthened and the driving forces of revolution cannot be properly fertilised.

14. The strikes were organised by the trade union fronts of the Front constituents mostly on the demands of increased wages and against factory closure or lockouts.

15. The joint venture policy witnessed stormy debates in the 12th Party Congress of the CPI(M) in December, 1985, held in Calcutta, which ultimately endorsed the policy in its political-organisational report.

16. The massive drive for industrialisation during the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes was built on an intense search for private and foreign capital, inciting volatile debates in the state politics.

17. Purnendu Sengupta was the Left Front candidate of the CPI in the Calcutta Corporation election in 1985.

18. Manuel Castells argued (2011:46): “...the process of communication in society, and the organizations and networks that enact this process of communication, are the key fields where programming projects are formed, and where constituencies are built for these projects.”
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