CONCLUSION

Before we come to a conclusion of the strategy of mobilisation by the CPI(M) among the jute workers in West Bengal and the success it had achieved in this front, let us summarise the whole argument in brief.

In Chapter-I, certain theoretical questions were raised. The theoretical questions pertain to the strategy of mobilisation in Marxism. The fundamental questions raised were: What role do mass organisations to be more specific trade unions, play in the mobilisation of the working class in a given historical set up?; and in what way parliamentary institution could be used for the purpose of mobilisation? We have seen that both of them could be used only in a limited way. Trade union mobilisation suffers from the problem of ‘economism’ and ‘spontaneity’, and needs the active guidance from the Party and parliamentary institutions can only be used in a limited manner for propaganda and other kind of activities. The understanding is that union activity lacks political consciousness, which has to be brought from outside and it is only the Party which can inculcate political consciousness among the workers. Parliamentary institutions suffers from the limitations of being bourgeois institutions, so designed to protect the interests of the ruling classes in a given society. Along with the theoretical questions we have tried to examine the theoretical position of the Party which intends to utilise its mass organisation and parliamentary institutions for the purpose of mobilisation.

In Chapter-II, we made an attempt to understand the nature of capital and labour in the industry. The whole argument was divided into two sections. In Section-I, an analysis was made on the strength of the mill owners in the industry. It was found that the mill owners in the industry are organised under the banner of “The Indian Jute Mills Association”, which is one of the most powerful organisations of Indian business. The strength of the mill owners is derived primarily from this organisation. The IJMA came into being in the second last decade of the 19th century and it is one of the most powerful organisations in the country. In the last few years, the IJMA has weakened considerably because of decline in membership and internal conflicts, but still it is the organisation which defends the interests of the capital in the industry jealously. The proof of this had been the industry-wide settlement in which the Unions and the Government had signed deals
with the organisation. The organisation is therefore the chief source of strength for the millowners. The second important source of strength is the organisation which represents the various interests related to jute trade. Since the health of these kind of interests is related with the health of the industry directly or indirectly and hence these organisations objectively and in the long run defend the jute millowners in their struggle against raw jute producers and the jute workers. Some of these associations/agencies are also controlled and owned by the millowners. The third important source of strength of the millowners is the relations which it enjoys with the Indian State. We have seen that the Indian State is not a neutral entity but it is the State of the ruling classes in India, whoever the ruling class/classes may be. Therefore the State in India directly or indirectly defends the interests of the millowners, since the millowners mostly belong to the monopoly houses in the country. The strength which the millowners enjoy is derived from its organisation, from other associations related to the jute trade and thirdly from the Indian State. We have seen that the millowners use several kind of weapons in its struggle with the jute labour, more recently it is using the weapon of lockouts, closures and suspension of work.

The second section was devoted to labour and its living conditions. In this section, we found that the jute industry even today continues to be a labour intensive industry with very little modernisation and employs around 2.5 lakhs workers. What is important is that though very little modernisation has been done, but the total labour complement in the industry had declined over the years. This points to the fact that the industry resorts to retrenchment. This retrenchment to some extent declined after the Left Front Government assumed office, but effectively retrenchment have not stopped even during the Left Front period. We have seen that out of the total work force in the industry, majority of the workers are non-Bengali workers. The workers belong mostly to the Hindi-speaking States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The Bengali workers have increased in more recent years and now around 25% of the total workers are from the State. It was also found that the economic condition of the workers is still miserable. Though there has been a significant improvement in their condition particularly after the Left Front Government came into existence. The workers practically don't earn much other than their wages, i.e. very little emoluments add to the total income of the workers. Added to this is the threat of closure, lockout, etc. The threat of closures and lockouts therefore hangs over them as a noose. The condition of the budlie worker is much more worse than the permanent worker. The millowners have never respected the
agreements signed on the complement of the work force, hence a large number of workers in the industry are quasi-permanent workers. It was also found that the condition of the workers in the non-IJMA member mills is much more worse since they receive less wages than that of the work force in the IJMA mills.

In Chapter-III, our main argument was that the mass organisation of the CPI(M), namely BCMU, affiliated to the CITU, primarily mobilises the workers for the Party. It was seen that the BCMU primarily used the grievances of the workers in this task of mobilisation from below. The ultimate weapon which it used for the redressal of the grievances and make the workers solidifying was the industrywide strike. Departmental and factory level strikes are only occasionally resorted to by the BCMU. It was pointed out that the BCMU does not organise these strikes individually but it organises these along with other central trade unions operating in the industry. It only takes the leading role since it is the largest organisation of the jute workers. The whole chapter was divided into three sections. In Section-I, we have examined the various grievances of the workers or the mobilisational issues for the BCMU. The issues include both economic and non-economic issues. The economic issues include: the issue of wage, D.A. and other emoluments, the issue of bonus, etc. The non-economic issues are: the issue of nationalisation, the issue of contract labour, bhagwalla and female workers, the issue of work complement, budlie workers and the issue of fair price for the jute agriculturalists. Economic issues have dominated the agenda of the BCMU. Out of the economic issues the issue of wage increase or a living wage is the most important one. It has been the principal demand since the early 1970s, and the principal demand in all the industrywide strikes from 1972 to 1992. The BCMU had demanded an increase in the total earnings of the workers and have called this demand as a demand for a living wage. The other main economic issue is the issue of bonus, which is a temporary one and is generally used during the festive season either when the millowners refuse to pay bonus or decides to pay less than the statutory minimum or when workers demand more than the minimum. Out of the non-economic but indirectly related to the long term economic objectives is the issue of nationalisation. The BCMU had made it an issue with the argument that it is only through nationalisation of the entire industry, from purchase of raw jute to marketing of jute products, the interests of the workers and the growers can be protected. Thus the argument is that the ownership of the industry in private hand is mostly responsible for the poor condition of the industry and the plight of the workers.
Realising that it is difficult to mobilise on this issue because nationalisation was not to come so easily, the BCMU had toned down on this in recent years. Another reason behind this toning down is that since the mid-1980s closures, lockouts and suspension of work, have affected the industry significantly. The owners use this weapon in order to deny the just demands of the jute workers and agriculturalists. Other important issues include work for budgie workers because this category of workers are quasi-permanent workers and are a permanent source of discontent in the industry.

In Section-II, we concentrated our attention to an analysis of the direct form of trade union action that is the industrywide strikes and the role of the BCMU in organising these strikes and mobilising the workers during the strikes. The strikes are important because this is ultimate form of direct weapon which the BCMU use in the industry in order to address the grievances of the workers. The strikes are industrywide and only occasionally factory and department level. There are two kinds of action, one is the one-day token strike and the other is the continuous industrywide strike. One day token strikes are resorted to pressurise the millowners to accept the demands and if the demands are not accepted, continuous strikes are resorted to which definitely are heroic struggles on the part of the jute workers. We have seen that strikes were resorted to in 1974, 1975, 1979, 1984 and 1992. All the strikes except the 1974 strike ended with a settlement and agreement. We have also observed that the form of struggle underwent a significant change after 1977. 1977 is an important year in the history of West Bengal, because of one particular reason, i.e. a Left Front Government led by the CPI(M) came power. Thus the nature of direct action prior to 1977 was different. It was much more militant in one sense that the BCMU and the workers under its fold had to confront the wrath of the Congress Government which openly sided with the millowners. It also confronted the INTUC leadership which was half-hearted in its approach to the just demands of the workers. Thus, the conditions in West Bengal in general and to the industry in particular was not conducive for direct action, but strikes were launched in 1974 and 1975. The strike of 1975 ended in a fiasco because of the negative attitude of the State Government and the millowners. The INTUC's half-hearted approach also led to disunity and hence the strike was withdrawn without a settlement. The change in the Government in the mid of 1977, led to changes in the attitude of the government towards labour. The Government, as we have found, initiated measures for restoring democratic and more particularly trade union rights. Thus, conditions favoured the launching of movement in the form of direct actions. The BCMU
took the initiative in this direction and launched powerful movements in 1979, 1984 and 1992. The settlement of 1988 was reached without a strike. And the gains of the strikes were tremendous since it helped in the improvement in the living conditions of the workers.

In the third section of this chapter, an attempt was made to analyse the problems involved in mobilisation in the industry. It was argued that though the BCMU is the leading union in the industry in terms of its membership, strength and its influence over the workers, but since the second half of the 1980, the BCMU’s popularity and influence had declined as a result the popularity and influence of the parent political party the CPI(M) also had declined. By the early 1990s, a large number of workers were under the influence of the ultra-leftists and the small section of the worker was under the influence of casteist and communal organisations. Moreover, the BCMU had very little control over the non-Hindi speaking workers. What can be the reason for this poor state of affairs for the BCMU and the Party. The reason is to be found in the growth of labour aristocracy, perceived decline in militancy by the workers, problems in the style of functioning of the leadership and low level of political work among the workers by the BCMU leadership. Some BCMU leaders have become labour aristocrats. Labour aristocracy among a section of the BCMU leadership have taken the form of a few concessions from the millowners. It is in many ways different from the labour aristocracy which prevails in Europe. Concession from the mill owners takes the form of getting a few passes, less work, or work in department where the work load is not heavy. This form of labour aristocracy, had led to a decline in the acceptance level of the leadership among the workers. Some are even dubbed by the workers as ‘dalals’. The second important reason lies in the style of functioning in the branch units. Some of the branches hardly function as units or trade union organisations. The most important reason for the decline in the influence and the strength of the BCMU lies in the low level of political work by the BCMU leadership among the workers. Struggles in the industry have mostly taken the form of economic struggles. BCMU have resorted more to economic struggle than political struggles. Thus economism had dominated the charter of demands of the BCMU. Mobilisation is less on political issues, as a result political consciousness of the workers have not improved significantly, and more particularly the consciousness of the Hindi-speaking workers have not improved. The Hindi-speaking workers can be categorised as semi-proletariat, those who have strong ties with their home villages. As a result they acquire their consciousness from outside West Bengal, from their
home State. This takes place more because there is little effort by the CPI(M) and the BCMU leadership to impart political consciousness.

In Chapter-IV of our study, we have analysed the second strategy of mobilisation of the CPI(M) in the State. This strategy of mobilisation could be referred to as the strategy of mobilisation from the top or from above. The Party called this strategy as the Bolshevik method of mobilisation. This method of mobilisation could be resorted by the Party only after 1977, when it formed its government in West Bengal. The crux of the strategy was to utilise the parliamentary institutions available to the party, which were under its limited control for providing relief to the masses in general and the workers in particular. The strategy was also to facilitate mobilisation from below, thus it was to complement the first and primary strategy of mobilisation from below. This strategy was mainly aimed at providing relief to the workers in general and in our case the jute workers in particular. This had paid dividend for the Party during its experiments in 1967 and 1970. The Party which was lagging behind in the trade union front in West Bengal gained control over a large number of unions in the State and could increase its influence among the jute workers in West Bengal. This was possible because the Party encouraged radical unionism and more particularly the tactic of gherao. Thus the party was encouraged to employ this strategy after it returned to power in 1977, but this time it was more cautious and called for some kind of restraint in the trade union front. This caution was necessitated by several factors and one of them was arresting of decline in the industrial sector. For several reasons, the industrial sector was declining and capital was moving out of the State. In order to arrest this deteriorating situation, what was necessary was to combine industrial development with trade union activism for the redressal of the grievances of the workers. Arresting the deteriorating industrial situation was also necessary because the condition of the factory and industry have a direct bearing on the workers which it sought to mobilise, in the face of growing unemployment. Thus, the strategy of improving the industrial climate is in conformity with its policy of providing relief to the workers and bringing the workers closer to the Party.

In order to analyse the strategy of mobilisation of workers and particularly the jute workers, we divided the whole chapter into four sections. In the first section, the CPI(M)'s position in West Bengal and its strategy of mobilisation when in government and not in government was analysed. It was found that from its inception, the CPI(M) was very strong in
West Bengal. The left wing within the undivided CPI was strong enough and hence after the split the CPI(M) emerged as a major left party in the State. When it formed a government along with other political parties in 1967, it was in a position to pursue radical trade union policy and particularly with its strategy of gherao it was able to expand its base among the industrial workers in the State. Thus, the strategy paid dividends to the Party and it was able to strengthen its mass base.

In the second section, we have primarily analysed the limitations of the Left Front Government. The limitation which its confronts stems out from the constitution, the bourgeois social and economic status and the limitation of depending on a elitist bureaucracy. This limitation acts on all the political parties but for a Communist Party, it is much more real. We have also seen that the Party realises its limitation fully and the ministers handling the various portfolios are aware of it. Thus, the Party realises this limitation and it is with this limited control of parliamentary institutions the Party attempts to mobilise the working class in the concerned industry.

In the third section, an attempt was made to evaluate the approach of the government to the industrial workers and their union. We have seen that the Left Front initiated ministerial measures for the relief of the working class who had suffered mass retrenchment, increased work load, lay off, mass unemployment and impounding of D.A., denial of bonus, wage freezes, rising prices, etc. since the beginning of the 1970s. There was thus a qualitative change in the orientation of the government. The main measures of the government had been to provide relief to the workers and employees and this took the form of support to the workers in their just and legitimate demand which involved the restoration of trade union and democratic rights, which were curtailed to a significant extent during the rule of the Congress in West Bengal. Secondly, the measures have taken the form of using the conciliation machinery of the government’s labour department, for the purpose of settlement of disputes in the interests of the workers or in favour of the workers. And, thirdly it had tried to keep the police administration neutral during disputes involving workers and the millowners. These measures of the government were discussed in detail in this section.

After having laid the foundation, for a discussion in Section-IV, we have discussed the approach of the CPI(M) led government towards jute labour and have founded that the
government's approach to jute workers conforms to its approach to industrial workers in the State. The government in order to protect the jute workers from the face of unemployment had pressurised the millowners substantially to open the mills under lockout and closure which hamper the employment prospects of the workers in the industry. It was also seen that the government used the conciliation machinery of the labour department for the purpose of settling disputes in favour of jute workers. We have also pointed out to the limitation which it faces in this regard since the millowners have resorted to bipartite agreements and have not involved the government in the negotiations. This had created problems for the workers and the unions, since most of the settlement of this kind are dictated settlements in the employers charter of demands. We have pointed out in this section the government in this regard had faced its limitation in a more real way. After having said this, we have assessed the government's attitude to the striking jute workers. It tried to keep the police administration neutral during the industrywide strike of 1977, 1984 and 1992, in sharp contrast to the attitude of the Congress government prior to 1977 when police intervened in the industrywide strike of 1974 and 1975 and openly sided with the millowners. We have concluded the chapter by arguing that the CPI(M) in government through its ministerial measures and its limited pressure on the millowners have tried to provide relief to the workers and bring them closer to the party, this had helped facilitate mobilisation from below to a limited extent.

After having analysed the two strategies of mobilisation of the jute workers, namely mobilisation from below and above, in order to substantiate our arguments, we have analysed the mobilisation effort of the CPI(M) at a much more micro level in two jute mill towns in the district of Howrah. The two mills, Bauria and Chengail, is the location centre for five jute mills and employs around 20,000 workers. We focused on the mobilisation effort by the BCMU, the trade union wing of the CPI(M) operating in the jute industry. We have seen that the BCMU have achieved considerable success in mobilising the workers but because of several reasons, it has failed to raise the political consciousness of the jute workers and more particularly the political consciousness of the Hindi-speaking non-Bengali work force in the industry. And this can be attributed as a reason for the decline in the strength and influence of the BCMU and the CPI(M) among the working class in this area. Other general factors which are responsible for the decline
influence is the growth of labour aristocracy in this region, including the leadership of the BCMU and very little political work among the workers in the area by the BCMU leadership.

After having summarised the whole discussion, only a few comments would suffice as concluding remarks. Firstly, the CPI(M)'s two-pronged strategy of mobilisation from below and above, paid significantly and the Party to a limited extent primarily through its trade union organisation, the BCMU and secondarily through the parliamentary institutions was able to mobilise a vast section of the jute workers prior to the mid-1980s. Through economic struggles, the BCMU was able to bring a large section of the jute workers closer to the Party. But we find due to several inherent problems within the BCMU leadership, it failed to keep this control over the workers particularly after the mid-1980s. The problems include the problem of labour aristocracy, secondly the problem of unit functioning and the problem of low level of political activity by the BCMU leadership among the working class population in the industry. One major failure had been that it failed to bring a vast majority of the Hindi-speaking workers under its fold from the very beginning. This is because the Party has failed to provide the much needed political consciousness to the working class, which can only be imparted by the Party.