2. **GENESIS OF THE PARTY**

The Congress (Organization) came into existence as a result of a split in the Indian National Congress. Though the present study seeks to analyze the role of the Congress (Organization) in West Bengal politics, the development of the all-India party has to be comprehended as well. Any study concerning the role of the state unit of an all-India party cannot ignore the role and impact of the national party developments. The Congress (Organization) in West Bengal was just a branch unit of the all-India party subscribing to the same constitution, programme and ideology as those of the national party. The organizational structure of the Congress also followed the centrally biased federal system of administration that obtains in India. The genesis of the Congress (Organization) in West Bengal has therefore to be understood in the background of the pre-split (1969) events that took place in the national level of the undivided Indian National Congress. Undoubtedly, however, the main focus in the present analysis will be on the developments in the party in West Bengal.

**The Split in the Congress Party Leadership** The Indian National Congress faced for the first time in its long existence from 1885, a clean vertical division in 1969. This split came about through a series of events closely following one another within a brief period of four months between August and November 1969.
The office of the Indian President fell vacant due to the demise of Zakir Hossain on 3 May 1969. V.V. Giri, the then Vice-President, became the acting President. The all-India committee of the ruling party, the Congress, met in Bangalore during 10-12 July 1969 and on the last day of the A.I.C.C. session, the Congress parliamentary board met to decide about the party's nominee for the presidential office, election for which was to be held in mid-August 1969.

The meeting of the Congress parliamentary board decided to nominate Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy as the party's presidential candidate. The decision, however, was not unanimous. Mrs. Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, proposed the name of Jagjivan Ram, one of her cabinet ministers, while a majority of the members of the board proposed Reddy's name and got it approved. Thus Reddy became the official Congress candidate in the ensuing presidential election.

Obviously, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi, felt humiliated at this decision of the parliamentary board. She expressed her annoyance at a press conference in Bangalore. On coming back to New Delhi, she relieved Moraji Desai, Deputy Prime Minister, of his finance portfolio on 16 July 1969, on the ground that Desai held reservations about the party's economic policy adopted at the Bangalore A.I.C.C. meeting. This caused

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1 See Atulya Ghosh The Split, Jayanti, Calcutta 1970, p.11. Among the following members of the parliamentary board: Mrs. Gandhi, Jagjivan Ram, F.A. Ahmed, Nijlingappa, Y.B. Chavan, Morarji Desai, S.K. Patil and Kamaraj, all except the first three supported Reddy's candidature.
a lot of misunderstanding between Nijlingappa, the Congress president and Mrs. Gandhi. But even then there was no indication that Mrs. Gandhi would go against the Bangalore decision about the party's nominee for the presidency. Mrs. Gandhi herself filed Reddy's nomination papers, and on 5 August 1969, at a meeting of the Congress members of parliament (attended by the Congress president), she pledged her support to the party's candidate.

The First Signs of Rift On 11 August 1969, Jagjivan Ram and F.A. Ahmed, both members of Mrs. Gandhi's cabinet, expressed in a letter to the Congress president, their resentment at the latter's approaching the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra parties for their support to the Congress candidate for the presidency. The next day, the Congress president explained in a letter to Ram and Ahmed that he had been approaching "every party for its support and every voter for his vote" as per the usual practice. He requested them not to doubt his bonafides. Ram and Ahmed however did not feel satisfied at the explanation and declared in a letter on 12 August 1969:

In the circumstances, our (Congress) members of Parliament and the States Legislatures should be entitled to exercise their votes in the coming President election according to their conscience.

On the same day, Nijlingappa, the Congress president wrote to the Prime Minister requesting her to issue a whip to Congress legislators to vote in favour of the Congress candidate, Reddy. On 13 August 1969 the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi
replied to intimate her refusal to do so. Mrs. Gandhi thus, in reality, advocated the principle of "free vote" or "vote according to conscience". In the election of the President that ensued, Reddy was defeated and V.V. Giri, the independent candidate, won. Obviously the victory of Giri was possible with the support of many of the opposition parties and a large section of Congress legislators (in Parliament and different states legislatures) who aligned themselves with Mrs. Gandhi in her confrontation against the Congress president and his loyal supporters in the Congress Working Committee.

After the presidential election, a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (the party's highest executive) was held on 26 August 1969 in New Delhi. At this meeting which was attended also by Mrs. Gandhi and her associates (Ram, Ahmed and others), a "Unity Resolution" was passed and it seemed as if the feuding groups had been reconciled. The unity resolution appealed to all concerned "to contribute to unity in the Organization." The direct confrontation between the Prime Minister and the party's organization leaders appeared to have subsided.

Fresh troubles, however, cropped up in October 1969. The Congress president, Nijlingappa attempted to remove C. Subramaniam, a close associate of Mrs. Gandhi, from the

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3 See Appendix i.
Congress Working Committee on the ground that Subramaniam no longer remained a member of the A.I.C.C. on his resignation from the presidentship of Tamilnad State Congress Committee (in which capacity Subramaniam was a member of the A.I.C.C.). Mrs. Gandhi saw in this attempt a conspiracy to weaken her position in the Working Committee. Her retaliation came in the form of a requisition notice from a large number of A.I.C.C. members demanding the convening of a meeting of the A.I.C.C. for the finalization of the programme of election of the Congress president due in December that year. Nijlingappa paid no heed to the requisition notice. Instead he convened a meeting of the Working Committee to be held on 1 November 1969. Just prior to this meeting, the Congress president removed Subramaniam from the Working Committee on the ground that he had ceased to be a member of the A.I.C.C. and also P.A. Ahmed on the ground that he had behaved in an indisciplined manner by campaigning in favour of Giri in the last presidential election. It seemed as if the anti-Mrs. Gandhi forces in the Working Committee were preparing for a showdown.

Mrs. Gandhi’s camp also did not remain inactive. On 1 November, when the Congress Working Committee began its meeting, it was found that it had been split into two bodies.

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4 Under the Congress party rules, one cannot become a member of the Working Committee unless one is a member of the A.I.C.C.

5 Ten members of the Working Committee attended the meeting at the Prime Minister’s residence and eleven attended the meeting at the party headquarters. See Nehal Singh Indira g India, A political notebook, Nachiketa Publications, Calcutta, 1978, p.10.
one meeting at the party headquarters under the presidency of Nijlingappa and the other at the Prime Minister's residence with Mrs. Gandhi in the chair. The process of the Congress split was initiated.

The succeeding events followed logically. The supporters of Mrs. Gandhi in the A.I.C.C. met at a requisitioned meeting on 22 and 23 November 1969, removed Nijlingappa from the presidency of the Congress and elected Jagjivan Ram as the new president of the Congress faction led by Mrs. Gandhi. The other wing (organizational) of the party led by Nijlingappa continued to function as before. In popular parlance, Mrs. Gandhi's faction came to be known as Congress (Ruling) or the new Congress while the Nijlingappa group became known as the Congress (Organization). The two groups of Congress leadership elites then became involved in an intensive as well extensive competition for enlisting the support of Congress members and legislators throughout India. Each claimed itself the real and the stronger Congress. Ultimately the 1971 parliamentary election proved the undoubted superiority of Mrs. Gandhi's party and the Congress (Organization) became reduced to the position of a minor party.

The real cause behind the split. The 1969-split in the Indian National Congress was a historic event with far-reaching consequences. It is therefore necessary that we attempt to analyze briefly, the real causes behind the split.
Maurice Duverger remarks:

Splitting of parties does not take place at the level of the masses but at the level of the leaders; generally it is the result of an attempt by subordinate leaders to oust leaders of a higher rank, or of certain high ranking officials to obtain the majority in collective bodies. By their very nature these fractions (sic) are not opposition coming from the base but opposition coming from the apex.

The truth of Duverger's remarks can be appreciated when we find that the split in the Indian National Congress was actually the follow-up consequence of a conflict that arose between the Prime Minister and her followers on the one hand and the president of the party and his supporters on the other, in the central parliamentary board of the party - "the supreme arbiter of Congress in the post-independence period." The lower echelons of the party were not involved in the conflict in its initial stage.

The Congress, in its long life, since 1885, had seen a number of factional conflicts before 1969. But the earlier conflicts always resulted only in large-scale defections from the party. Unlike the previous conflicts in the Congress, which resulted in the creation of new political parties with new labels, the 1969 split created two groups (each of which claimed to be the real Congress) contributing to the same

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political ideology, the same socio-economic programme and the same constitution. Again, though the earlier conflicts had their due impact upon the political process, the 1969-split was "a great upheaval ... which encompassed all facets of Indian life political, economic, cultural and ideological". 8

In the words of one of the main participants in the conflict, the 1969-split was "one of the most significant events having far-reaching consequences for India". 9

The 1969 split - a result of power-struggle The Congress split of 1969 has been described by many as the result of a conflict of ideologies, a struggle between the progressives and the reactionaries in the Congress, a fight between the "old" and the "new". A main participant in the conflict, Mrs. Gandhi herself described it in the following words:

"It is a conflict between those who are for socialism, for change and for the fullest internal democracy and debate in the organization on one hand, and those who are for "status quo" (italics), for conformism and for less than full discussion inside the Congress." 10

In contrast, the other most important participant in the conflict, Nijlingappa, the then Congress president, characterized it as a conflict that has been forced on the organization by her (Mrs. Gandhi's) obsessive desire for power in the organization and the Government". 11

8 A.M. Zaid, op-cit, Editor's Preface, p.XXI.
9 Atulya Ghosh, op.cit. p.3.
10 Extract from a letter to Congressmen addressed by Mrs. Gandhi on 8 November 1969 and published in the Hindusthan Times (daily), New Delhi 12 November 1969.
Polarization and Power Confrontation

The 1969 Congress split was actually the result of a power confrontation between two leadership elite-factions in the Indian National Congress. Factional quarrels for the sake of power are not unknown even to the highly centralized, closed and regimented parties and they are the most common features of party functioning in respect of mass parties having unrestricted membership. Since factional conflicts are inevitable in democratic institutions, there should exist in every democratic party, a built-in, conflict-resolving, consensus-building apparatus. The Indian National Congress, particularly, had been very successful in resolving its conflicts. The conflict-resolving mechanism of the Congress however failed to solve the 1969 dispute between the groups led by the Prime Minister and the Congress president.

The reason for the failure of the party's conflict-resolving apparatus to resolve this particular dispute lay perhaps in the fact that the conflict between the party's two groups of central leadership elites had assumed the "pattern of severe conflict" as noted by Robert Dahl, when "leaders of rival coalitions diverge more and more in their attitudes on key political questions".

Since after the 1967 general election, the key question before the Congress was how to maintain itself in power at the centre in the face of an ever-growing strength of the opposition.

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12 Kochanek, Stanley A., remarks "...the durability of the Congress is attributable to its well-exercised ability to adapt pragmatically to change, its highly developed skill in managing its conflicts ...(Congress Party of India, pp.XIX-XX)

in the Lok Sa'oha (the Congress strength was only 279 in a House of 525 members). Mrs. Gandhi, as the Prime Minister had, in the circumstances, perhaps decided to find out ways and means to woo the leftist parties to collaborate with her government. This she tried to do by assuming a leftist posture. Most of the organization leaders, on the other hand, it seems, believed that the handling of governmental affairs by Mrs. Gandhi was not being satisfactorily performed and that the Prime Minister should be more subservient to the party's president and his Working Committee. Again, in tune with their interpretation of the Congress tradition, the organization leaders, it may be doubted, preferred the party's alignment with the rightist Jan Sangh, Swatantra and Socialist parties in parliament rather than with the Communists (the CPI and the CPI-M) for maintaining the Congress rule. Thus the basic attitudes of the two leadership groups in respect of the key political questions diverged.

From after the Bangalore A.I.C.C. session in August 1969 till the final split, the divergence of attitudes between the rival leadership factions had intensified so much that on 1 November 1969 the Congress was having parallel Working Committee meetings. A scheduled dinner-meeting arranged on 7 November for bringing about a rapprochement between Nijlingappa and Mrs. Gandhi was cancelled by the latter at the last moment.  

It was perhaps a curious, but at the same time a significant coincidence that S.A. Dange, Chairman of the CPI, issued on 7 November 1969 a statement warning Mrs. Gandhi that any attempt on her part for a reconciliation with the organization leaders would entail a loss of support from the CPI. Dange's statement was broadcast over the radio at noon and Mrs. Gandhi intimated the cancellation of the dinner-meeting to Nijlingappa in late afternoon that day.
and from then on, virtually all meaningful communications for a solution of the dispute between the two groups, broke altogether. Thus all the symptoms of a severe conflict, as described by Robert Dahl, were there.

The snapping of social and ideological ties, the diminution of overlapping cleavages, polarization into two hostile camps, the appearance of a single fault line... in short, the change from overlapping to cross-cutting cleavages...15

There was thus the final parting of ways between the two leadership groups.

The cleavages had become "cross-cutting" since each found the other at fault in every respect. Mrs. Gandhi and her followers believed that the organization leaders were conspiring with the rightists (the Jan Sangh, the Swatantra party) for overthrowing the Prime Minister, while the organization leaders thought that Mrs. Gandhi had already hatched up an understanding with the communists.

An objective analysis of the events leading to the Congress split of 1969 would thus establish that it was not caused by ideological differences. Both the groups professed their faith in the ideology of democratic socialism, both had expressed their confidence in a programme of planned economic development on socialistic lines, both declared their faith in the "Ten-Point" economic programme16 of the party, both upheld India's foreign policy of non-alignment, and both swore by the names of Gandhi and Nehru. Basically, it was a personality-conflict.

15 Robert A. Dahl, op.cit., p.288
16 See Appendix II
between Mrs. Gandhi and the organization leaders that intensified into a "cross-cutting" cleavage over the question of nominating the presidential candidate.

That the split was caused by a power-conflict is further proved by the events connected with the presidential election. It is Mrs. Gandhi who filed Reddy's nomination paper for the president election. She however shifted her stand at the last moment and went for a difficult political exercise to defeat him because, presumably, she found the danger involved in Reddy's victory.

Neither could the organization leaders accept Mrs. Gandhi's proposed candidate for the party's ticket, because perhaps, after having found their hopes of making Mrs. Gandhi, their "showboy" in the government, completely belied, they wanted to utilize the opportunity of filling the presidential vacancy to impose controls on her through a President belonging to their camp. In 1969, with the provisions of the Indian constitution regarding the position and powers of the President unusually vague, a President might, if he so wished, exert a great amount of control upon a Prime Minister enjoying a slender majority support in the Lok Sabha.

Moreover, the organization leaders did not also completely reject the possibility that, under extreme situations, they might have to change even the Prime Minister. This would not be very difficult for them with a co-operating President and the support of a large number of Congress M.Ps. The support of the Jan Sangh, the Swatantra and the Socialist elements in parliament might also come handy in such a situation.
Obviously, Mrs. Gandhi had foreseen this danger for herself. The issue of the nomination of the party's presidential candidate was thus connected with her very survival. Rightly, has it been pointed out:

> Once the Board decided by majority vote in favour of N. Sanjivee Reddy against the wishes of Mrs. Gandhi who had suggested the name of Jagjivan Ram, she found in this a design to break her in the hands of the Indian President.

In sum, for the organization leaders, the presidential nomination was a prestigious issue and a process through which they could reduce Mrs. Gandhi to a position of dependence upon them; for Mrs. Gandhi it was essentially a struggle for survival. What ensued, therefore, was a power confrontation between two groups of personalities with high stakes for each of them involved in the process.

It is evident, therefore, that the Congress split of 1969 was caused initially by a power-conflict between the Prime Minister and her followers on the one hand and the organization leaders on the other. The conflict had started as a result of fear psychosis generated in both the groups. Both were afraid of being deprived of their pre-eminence in their respective spheres of influence and of being dislodged from the power-centre. Both were trying to maintain their respective power positions through adopting tactics and strategies which ultimately

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led them to situations of cross-cutting cleavage from which neither could retrace. After, however, the split finally came, the two parties declared different ideological or policy commitments. 18

The West Bengal Scene

It is interesting to note the impact of the conflict between the organization leaders and Mrs. Gandhi in Delhi upon the West Bengal Congress. However, in order to appreciate the developments that took place in the West Bengal party in the wake of the split, it is necessary to have a look at the past.

The West Bengal Congress, since the rise of Atulya Ghosh to presidency of the state party in 1950, had become in 1969, more like a Hindu joint-family than a political party functioning on democratic lines. There prevailed the happiest relationship between the Congress government and the party in West Bengal. Between 1950 and 1962, the chief minister, Dr. B.C. Roy was supreme in the government, as Atulya Ghosh, the party president was in the party 19 and there was complete understanding between the two. Doubtless, Dr. Roy's was the more dominating personality and, Ghosh like all other Congress personalities of the state maintained a deferential attitude towards Roy. Dr. Roy, on his part also, had the greatest admiration for Ghosh's organizational abilities.

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18 Iqbal Harain comments (about the split): "Basically a power confrontation, the conflict assumed ideological overtones". See his article, "Democratic Politics and Political Development in India", *Asian Survey*, February 1970, p.96.

After the death of Roy in 1962, P.C. Sen, the deputy leader of the Congress legislature party, became the chief minister. In Congress politics, Sen had been Ghosh's political "elder brother" since the days of the non-co-operation movement of the twenties. The two would never disagree. Hence, after the death of Dr. Roy, Atulya Ghosh's political control became all-pervasive. The state Congress was his "domestic affair" (critics would say); now with P.C. Sen as the chief minister, even the state government came under his grip. So powerful he became that in popular parlance Ghosh was nicknamed "Bangeswar" (lord of Bengal).

The Background Canvas. The first signs of dissent in the happy family of the monolithic state Congress appeared in 1966 when serious differences arose between Ajoy Mukherjee (the then State Congress president) and the followers of Atulya Ghosh in Midnapur district over the affairs of the Zilla Parishad (rural self-governing body in a district) and the district party committee. This dispute ultimately culminated in the passing of a no-confidence motion against Mukherji in the state party committee and his removal from the presidency. Till then, however, Sen-Ghosh alliance remained intact.

In the wake of Ajoy Mukherji's removal from the Congress, a new party known as Bangla Congress came into existence under Mukherji's leadership just before the 1967 general election. This event and the prevailing anti-Congress political atmosphere in the state, along with other factors were responsible for the first defeat of the Congress in the state assembly election. In spite of the fact that Congress became the largest party in the
assembly (127 in a house of 280) after the election, the state Congress leadership resolved not to accept the responsibility of forming the government. For the first time since independence, Congress members in the assembly sat in the opposition. The leftist political parties joined hands with Ajoy Mukherji's Bangla Congress and formed the first "United Front" government in West Bengal.

Differences between Ajoy Mukherji and the CPI-M (the biggest left party in the coalition), however, arose within a few months. The rivalry between the two intensified so much that in late September, 1987, Mukherji began making secret attempts to hatch up an alliance between the anti-CPI(M) elements in the United Front and the Congress in order that he might head an alternative Bangla Congress-Congress coalition government. P.C. Sen and many of his followers in the Congress wanted their party to cooperate with Ajoy Mukherji and to try to form such a coalition government. Atulya Ghosh and his most trusted followers in the party were, however, totally opposed to such a move. This gave rise to a serious misunderstanding between P.C. Sen and his followers on the one hand and the Ghosh-supporters on the other.

Sen also took a fresh initiative in having an ad-hoc Congress committee appointed in West Bengal in place of the state committee dominated by the Ghosh faction. Neither of Sen's above-mentioned efforts however succeeded ultimately. In the governmental sphere, Ajoy Mukherji backed out at the last moment (October 2, 1987) and the United Front government continued for a few days more after which the ministry was dismissed. A
Congress-P.D.F. coalition then took over, but this also did not last for more than a month and the Governor had to dissolve the assembly to impose President's rule in West Bengal. In the Congress itself, though an ad-hoc state committee was appointed, it was soon dissolved and the earlier committee was restored. For the time being, Sen was forced to agree to the stand taken by the Ghosh-faction but the original understanding between Sen and Ghosh disappeared altogether.

The 1967 defeat, the subsequent differences among the state Congress leaders, and the Governor's dissolution of the assembly without giving a chance to the CPI(M) to test its strength in the assembly - all these combined to cause an eroding impact upon the Congress party organization. In the next mid-term poll held in 1969, Congress found its strength in the assembly further depleted. It was only 65 in a House of 280.

**Congress House in Disarray** The main architect of the West Bengal Congress organization in the post-independence days, Atulya Ghosh, had won all the three successive elections to parliament, held before 1967, when for the first time he was defeated. This factor, combined with his party's all-round discomfiture in West Bengal had caused a serious decline in his position in the state party. The anti-establishment elements in the party had

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20 The Congress Progressive Democratic Front coalition was composed of the Congress M.L.As, a few M.L.As who broke away from the Bangla Congress and a few other independent and Muslim League M.L.As.
become vocal against both Ghosh and Sen after the party's defeat in 1967. Now, after the party's most disheartening performance in the 1969 mid-term poll, they became much more effective against the state party leadership. This new group began to be led by the once-rebel Congressman, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, who became after 1969, also the leader of the Congress legislature party and leader of the opposition in the assembly. An ambitious politician, as Ray was, he established direct links with Mrs. Gandhi and was carrying on a campaign against Ghosh inside the party.

The Bangalore A.I.C.C. meeting was thus held at a time when the Congress house in West Bengal was in a state of disarray. The "iron man" of the state Congress, Atulya Ghosh, stood discredited before the electorate and the Congress rank and file who now blamed him for the party's successive defeats in 1967 and 1969 elections. Ghosh's personal followers had resigned from the party's executive posts after the 1969 debacle. He himself had by then (August 1969) removed himself from direct participation in the state party affairs. The previous Sen-Ghosh understanding was absent. The old state party leadership stood discredited, but a new leadership cadre was yet to replace it.

21 Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a rising barrister of south Calcutta, was originally inducted into the Congress by Dr. B.C. Roy, who made him in 1957 a minister in his cabinet. Ray, however, resigned from the cabinet and the assembly in 1958 in protest against what he said the "anti-people" policy of the Congress government. Ray won the by-election in 1958 and also the 1952 general election as an independent candidate with the support of the leftists. After 1958, Ray was again admitted to the Congress legislature party as a result of the efforts of P.C. Sen and Atulya Ghosh in the face of opposition from many Congress activists and legislators.
In the background of such a distressful state of affairs in the West Bengal Congress party and loss of credibility of the old leadership, came the Bangalore A.I.C.C. meeting and the immediately following presidential election. Even in such a critical situation, many Congressmen believe, neither P.C. Sen nor Atulya Ghosh did seriously try to convince the state Congress MLAs about the justifiability of the stand taken by the organization leaders. Instead, it is alleged, both these leaders remained complacent, believing that most of the Congress legislators would remain loyal to the party whip. The result of the presidential poll revealed that 30 out of 55 Congress MLAs of West Bengal had voted in favour of V.V. Giri, Mrs. Gandhi’s candidate.

The “Syndicate”23 thus lost its first battle against Mrs. Gandhi in a state which had been, so to say, a “personal kingdom” of one of its creator-stalwarts, Atulya Ghosh.

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22 Many close associates of Atulya Ghosh told the author that Ghosh did not come to Calcutta to meet the Congress MLAs, nor did he send any message to them before the presidential election. In personal interviews many state Congress (C) leaders told the author that P.C. Sen also had not exerted himself adequately to convince the Congress legislators (before the election) about the justifiability of the stand taken by the organization leaders.

23 The term “Syndicate” was originally used by Mrs. Gandhi and her supporters to denote those leaders of the Congress Working Committee who had opposed her. Later, the group of Congressmen who remained loyal to the organization leaders became known in popular parlance, as the Syndicate group. See, in this connection, Atulya Ghosh, The Split, Jayanti, Calcutta 1970, pp.23-30.