The Congress(O) was miserably defeated in the 1971 election. Doubts arose therefore if the party would dissolve itself and merge with the Congress led by Mrs. Gandhi. Even the state Congress(O) leader, P.C. Sen had conceded after the 1971 poll that Mrs. Gandhi's Congress was the real Indian National Congress. But the Congress(O) did not wind itself up nor merged in Mrs. Gandhi's new Congress. The party continued to function till 1977, when it finally merged in the Janata party.

The 1971 election had crushed the Congress(O). In West Bengal, the Congress(O) polled only 5.8 per cent of popular votes and so far as the question of Congress succession was concerned, the 1971 poll had settled it finally - Mrs. Gandhi's Congress was the real Congress. But the Congress(O) people would not accept the 1971 verdict.

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1 Analyzing the impact of the 1971 election upon the Congress(O) at the national level, Morris Jones writes: “Congress(O) was crushed from 65 seats to 16 (in parliament). With its 10.5% voteshare it was the largest single opposition party, but closer inspection shows that it has been reduced in effect to a patchy regional rump”.

In the West Bengal party, a fierce debate ensued on the propriety of Sen's statement referred to above. In an atmosphere of mutual allegations and counter-allegations among the partymen, the state Congress(O) executive met on 17 March 1971. It turned into a free for all. Hundreds of party workers gatecrashed into the meeting and demanded that the statements of leaders like P.C.Sen and Atulya Ghosh be disowned by the party. After a heated debate lasting for over four hours, P.C.Chunder, the state party president declared that his party would continue to work according to its policy and programme and there was no proposal for winding up the organization.

Under pressure from the party ranks, P.C.Sen had to modify his earlier statement. He now said:

What I feel is that without public support, we cannot effectively run our organization. But it was obvious that my statement implied that those who desired could join the Congress led by Jagjivan Ram without being called defectors. But those who in no circumstances can join the other Congress may very well work in an intensive manner in his area till he is accepted by the Congress led by Mr. Jagjivan Ram with honour or till he and others feel confident about setting up block, district and Pradesh Congress Committees affiliated to the Indian National Congress.

The party thus decided to continue to operate; still it seemed that the West Bengal party was not clear about the political stand it should take. While the party opposed the new Congress at the all-India level, the state unit pledged its unconditional support to the new Congress-Bangla Congress coalition government installed in the state after the 1971 election. Perhaps, leaders

like P.O. Sen and others were still holding a lurking hope that through this gesture they might help the process of a happy reunion with Mrs. Gandhi, "the daughter of the same family", to use Sen's own expression. At the next meeting of the party's general committee, a prominent leader, Hansadhwaj Dhara, moved a resolution on the need for unity of the two Congresses. The meeting, by a narrow majority, decided to circulate the motion among party members and take it up for consideration in the future.3

Stand taken by the Central Leadership At the central level, the party's Working Committee tried its best to maintain a bold posture in the face of the 1971 debacle. At its first post-election meeting the Working Committee opined:

Electoral reverses are not unknown to political parties and as such there is no point in harping on these.... A political party in its parliamentary career had to contend with variation in its fortunes, at times, even heavy reverses.4

The meeting concluded with a call to party men to start functioning with a greater vigour and loyalty.

After the first shock of the overwhelming disaster of the 1971 poll was over, the Congress(O) rank and file all over the country blamed the central leadership for its wrong strategy of 'grand alliance'. This was the case not only with the Congress(O) but all the constituent parties of the

3 WBPCC(O) general body resolution (unpublished) dated 4 April 1971.
4 Congress(O) Working Committee resolution dated 14 March 1971.
alliance. An expert reports in this connection:

The Congress-O, Swatantra, Jan Sangh right of center coalition proved to be a failure and since the elections there has been much recriminations within each of the parties over their electoral strategy.

The West Bengal Congress(O) opined that "it was high time that the philosophy of alliance or the front philosophy was abandoned".

In the A.I.C.C.(O) meeting in Bombay the party leadership admitted that:

* The recent experience has shown that the Congress will have to rely on its own strength in future elections and for putting the country back on the right democratic path. The Congress in the changed conditions of the country today has principally to play the role of the opposition at the centre and in several states in the country.7

The central party leadership did not suffer from any misgivings about its relationship with the ruling Congress and preferred to work as an opposition party.

The party leadership both at the state and central levels thus finally decided to maintain the separate identity of Congress(O), but many of the party's rank and file were beginning to seriously think how relevant was the role of the party in the changed political context. The A.I.C.C.(O) resolution could not inspire them. Many prominent Congress(O) leaders in different states left the party in a bid to join the new Congress. Even Sanjeeva Reddy, the personality around whose presidential candidature the undivided Congress party had split, resigned.

6 WBC(O) executive committee resolution dated 9 May 1971.
from the Congress(O) on 25 May 1971. There started, it seemed, an exodus of the Congress(O) workers and the new Congress was faced with the problem of a mass entry. Myron Weiner describes the development thus:

In fact, one of the major problems now confronting Congress, especially after its electoral victory, is that the party is attracting back so many defectors and Congress-O supporters that the party is faced with the prospect of again being the catch-all party it was not only prior to 1969 split but even prior to the splintering which took place in 1966 and 1967.

Impact of Bangladesh Liberation Movement In late March 1971 a movement had started in East Pakistan, a neighbouring region of West Bengal. The Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan under Mujibur Rahman had started a 'war of liberation' against their non-Bengali Pakistani masters of Rawalpindi. As a result of the civil war that ensued, nearly a crore of East Pakistanis (both Hindus and Muslims) crossed the India-East Pakistan borders to seek refuge in West Bengal. Mujibur Rahman was arrested and flown to Rawalpindi, but his followers set up an exile government within West Bengal and extended help to the liberation movement in East Pakistan from here. The East Pakistan liberation movement had a tremendous impact upon the West Bengal populace and political parties. The Congress(O) on its part provided the Bangladesh liberation volunteers with money and other materials. P.C. Sen deputed one of his trusted associates to keep a close contact with the leaders of the liberation movement. Officially, the party demanded that

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8 Myron Weiner: op. cit. p.1163.
9 Author's interview with P.C.Sen and other leaders of the WBPCC(O).
the government of India recognize the independent "Bangladesh government" and come to the aid of the freedom fighters of East Pakistan.10

**The West Bengal Anarchy**

Even after the installation of the coalition government composed of the new Congress, the Bangla Congress, the Gorkha League, the PSP, the SSP and the Muslim League, after the 1971 poll, the state's law and order situation had not improved. Loot, murders, inter-party clashes and killings continued as before; neither did the Naxalite depredations show any sign of abatement. Birbhum, one of the richest rice producing districts had now become one of the areas worst-affected by Naxalite operations. In August 1971, the state Congress(O), in accordance with its programme of resisting Naxalism, opened in Birbhum a few peace camps with the cooperation of the villagers of Batikar, Haruipur and a few others. Nirmalendu Dey, a former general secretary of the undivided WBPCG, was specially deputed by the party leadership to conduct the camps and the peace campaign in Birbhum.11

The Congress(O) volunteers working in these camps soon realized that the incidents of violence had their source more in the economic grievances of the landless peasantry than in any political philosophy. P.C.Sen analyzed the situation as follows:

> The majority of the poorer sections of the people in Birbhum had not been given their dues for long and I feel that the recent trouble in the district is due to that and not for achieving any political ideology.12

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10 *Extended executive committee of WBPCG(O) resolution (unpublished) dated 10 July 1971.*


The Congress(O) volunteers in Birbhum arranged for villagewise bi-partite negotiations between the landowners and the agricultural labourers and were successful in bringing about peaceful settlement of the wage question in many areas. This had a sobering impact and henceforth incidents of violence became fewer. At first, people doubted the potential capability of the Congress(O), and a political commentator had remarked: "The Organization Congress's peace camp at Batikar represents no more than a pious hope in this disintegrating society". The results of the party's campaign however demonstrated that efforts in Birbhum were not entirely fruitless.

Along with its peace-keeping activities in Birbhum, the Congress(O) tried its best to focus people's attention to the grave law and order situation caused by the inter-party clashes in the city of Calcutta and its suburbs. Between May and August 1971, the youth and students' wings of the new Congress had assumed a militant stance against the party's political opponents. The CPI(M) and its Left Front allies, were the main objects of their wrath and many leftist political workers were being forced to leave their residence in certain areas and go elsewhere. Many such areas of the city and the suburbs were declared by the Congress volunteers as "liberated areas". The Congress(O) state executive decided to start a movement against...

what is called,

... the fascist activities of the ruling party often being committed in collusion with extremists, Marxists and anti social elements.\textsuperscript{14}

By "Marxists", the Congress(O) meant the CPI, which believed in the Marxist philosophy but at the same time was an ally of the new Congress in 1971.

**Midnapur Office Incident** In late August 1971, the Midnapur unit of the new Congress students' wing, Chhatra Parishad (Mahajati), forcibly occupied the district Congress(O) office building in Midnapur town. The Chhatra Parishad wanted to convert it into a students' hostel and occupied it presumably on the ground that since the house had been a property of the undivided Indian National Congress, the new Congress (which was the real Congress, they argued) had a better claim upon it. On receipt of the information, Abha Maiti, the most prominent woman-leader of the state Congress-0 (a former minister of the state government) who was at that time, the president of Midnapur district Congress(O) staged a hunger-strike inside the state headquarters of the new Congress in Calcutta on 30 August 1971.

The same night, she was forcibly removed from the new Congress office by some volunteers of the party. She then shifted the site of her hunger-strike to the Park Street-Chowringhee crossing, a busy area of the city. Abha Maiti's hunger-strike continued for seven days during which period thousands of people from different parts of the state visited her at the hunger-strike.

\textsuperscript{14} WBPCC(O) executive committee resolution (unpublished) dated 28 August 1971.
amp and condemned the forcible occupation of the Congress(o) office by the ruling party. The public resentment went so high that at last the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi, intervened and prevailed upon the new Congress(o) student workers to vacate the Midnapur Congress(o) office and hand over the possession of the building to the district Congress(o) secretary.

The Midnapur Congress(o) office incident not only brought the party into full public view, but it also helped the party to secure the sympathy of many who considered this act of the ruling Congress as an intrusion upon the rights and privileges of an opposition party. Even, Promode Dasgupta, General Secretary of the West Bengal CPI(M), wrote in a letter to the state Congress(o) General Secretary that though the CPI(M) had serious differences with the Congress(o), yet "we cannot but strongly condemn this atrocious and indecent behaviour to which your party and Miss Maiti has been subjected". The new Congress occupation of Midnapur Congress(o) office, the protest hunger-strike of Abha Maiti and the ultimate victory of the Congress(o) in this incident, became a morale-booster for the Congress(o).

Differences in the Central Party Soon after the Midnapur office incident, the state Congress(o) had to face a state-wide election.

16 Ananda Bazar Patrika (a vernacular daily), Calcutta 31 August 1971.
16 ibid., Calcutta 6 and 7 September 1971.
17 Letter from Promode Dasgupta to Asoke Krishna Datta, General Secretary, WBPCO-O (unpublished) dated 3 September 1971, WBPCO(O) records.
In September 1971, the West Bengal parties began their preparations for the next state assembly poll which had been necessitated by the resignation of the new Congress-led coalition government in late June 1971. The state leaders of the Congress(O) were trying to build up an electoral alliance with a few small parties like the Socialist Party, the SSP, the PSP and the Dhara faction of the Bangla Congress.

The 1972 Election

The election in West Bengal was announced to be held on 11 March 1972. The state Congress(O) decided to contest this election as a constituent unit of a four-party electoral combine - West Bengal Democratic Alliance. The other constituent units of the Alliance were: the Dhara-led Bangla Congress, the rebel S.S.P. and the Indian Awami League.

The Congress(O)-led Alliance announced an ambitious programme. It pledged to free West Bengal from anarchy and disorder, from poverty and from the constantly plaguing ill of unemployment. The programme included decentralization of administrative, economic and political powers; increased production and productivity and stable prices; speedy distribution of surplus land to the landless and fixation of a ceiling on urban property.

It is not unusual that parties which know for certain that they will not be called upon to take up the reins of government, make tall promises. In this connection, a European political analyst writes:

...their verbal fervor tended to be symptomatic, however, of their weak position in the present. They made up for the lack of their current influence with a vista of an utopian future, and could be 'wholistic' in their ideological claims
precisely because they had little chance ever to be
confronted with the compromises that political power
entails ... 19

The Democratic Alliance could extend such tall promises in
their manifesto, because perhaps, they knew well that they
"had little chance of being confronted with the compromises
that political power entails". The Alliance declared that it
would set up 180 candidates for the 1972 assembly election.

The election was actually a straight contest between the
Progressive Democratic Alliance composed of the new Congress
and the CPI and the Left Front comprising the CPI(M), the R.S.P.,
the S.U.C.I., the R.C.P.I., the Marxist Forward Bloc, the
Workers' Party, the Biplabi Bangla Congress and a few independents.
At the last moment there was an adjustment between the Left Front
and the Forward Bloc. The Congress(0) was no factor in the
election.

In late January 1972, the new Congress was at the pinnacle
of its popularity. The Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi had led a
victorious war against Pakistan, she had 'liberated' Bangladesh
and had implemented a few basic socialist measures like
nationalizing the banks and the General insurance companies and
amending the constitutional provisions of the right to property.
The party (the new Congress) announced in its election manifesto
that it would provide land to the landless through a speedy land
reforms programme, employment to the unemployed through setting

19 Hans Daalder's article, "Parties, Elites and Political
Developments in Western Europe" in Joseph Palambora and
Myron Weiner (eds), Political Parties and Political
up of rural industries and arranging bank credit for the unemployed youth, artisans, small agriculturists etc. The party also promised an extensive programme of rural electrification. All this created a sort of "Indira wave" in the country and the new Congress secured majority seats in all and two-thirds majority seats in 11 out of 16 state assemblies and two union territory Councils for which elections were held in 1972. In West Bengal, Mrs. Gandhi's party won 218 of the 280 assembly seats and 49.082 per cent of the popular votes. The Left Front won only 17 seats. The Front leaders alleged that the election was "entirely rigged" and, therefore, they would boycott the 'rigged' assembly. Whether or not rigging actually took place, the fact remains that the 1972 election undeniably registered an overwhelming popular support for the new Congress.

The Congress(O) could win only two assembly seats. P.C. Sen won from Arambag a creditable victory polling more than the combined votes of his new Congress and CPI(M) rivals and Prodyot Mahanti(32), a young lawyer, was elected from Dhatan constituency of Midnapur. Clearly, Sen's was a personal victory, while the party could claim that its organizational strength accounted for Mahanti's victory in Midnapur. The Congress(O) candidates in Midnapur district polled larger number of votes than in other districts and in a few constituencies of the district, the party lost the election by narrow margins. The party secured 1.460 per cent of popular votes.

20 The 1972 election manifesto of the Indian National Congress.
After 1971, the new Congress had secured more than a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha; the 1972 assembly elections gave it governing authority in all the states except Tamilnadu. Thus in March 1972, the new Congress emerged as the dominant party in India which from now on began to enjoy an effective monopoly of political power in India. Speaking about dominant parties in Latin America, a political analyst says that it,

... holds effective monopoly of power and controls access to government offices... other parties may exist legally but for reasons unrelated to legal questions or government coercion, find themselves unable to challenge effectively the dominant party's hold on public power.  

The situation in India after the 1972 election was more or less the same as described above.

In West Bengal, after the 1972 election the support for the new Congress was so overwhelming and the young cadres of the party assumed such a militant stance against the major opposition party, the CPI(M), that the latter, after a series of inner-party meetings, decided to lie low for the time being and consolidate its organization which, the party cadres acknowledged, was in a state of disarray.  

Agitation over Drought Situation Even after the miserable defeat of 1972 the state Congress(O) and its 77-year-old leader, P.C. Sen, however remained undaunted. In May 1972, in the face of an

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extreme draught situation in West Bengal, the party organized a satyagraha (non-violent passive resistance) movement "to draw its (the government's) attention to the acute scarcity of drinking water throughout the state". The Congress(O) agitation took the form of a long foot march by P.C. Sen and other party leaders, followed by hundreds of volunteers and villagers from Arambag on 17 May 1972. The padayatra (foot-march) was pursued through Hooghly and Bankura districts, where acute scarcity of drinking water prevailed, under the most difficult conditions of the scorching heat of May. This, undoubtedly earned for the Congress(O) public support and sympathy.

The new Congress government was quick to respond to the popular demand. The state cabinet immediately sanctioned schemes for digging tubewells and wells in the draught-affected areas to be undertaken on a war footing. On the chief minister's request, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi, paid a visit to the draught-affected areas of West Bengal and assured immediate central assistance for fighting the draught situation. Thereupon, the Congress(O) ended its satyagraha. Thus, even in an adverse environment, Sen launched a successful opposition movement. This gave the otherwise frustrated party cadres at least a sense of effectiveness.

Requisition of the Congress(O) Headquarters The Congress(O) leaders of West Bengal might feel jubilant over the success in their fight for supply of drinking water in the rural areas, but a far bigger struggle was awaiting them in the city of Calcutta.

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The undivided state Congress owned a valuable property in the form of its office-building comprised of two buildings at Chowringhee, Calcutta. After the split, this building-complex remained under the possession of the Congress(O). After the Supreme Court judgment declaring Mrs. Gandhi's Congress as the real Indian National Congress (for purposes of election matters like symbol etc.), the militant section of the ruling Congress was very keen upon dislodging the state Congress(O) from the undivided party's office-building. This was attempted in July 1972 by the new Congress in West Bengal through a governmental action.

The 'Congress Bhawan', at Chowringhee Road, Calcutta, had two houses—one five storey and another six storey building—joined together by a passage in the first floor. After the 1971 defeat, the state Congress(O) leadership shifted its headquarters to the smaller house and was negotiating with an industrialist for leasing out the other house. This industrialist, on his part, was negotiating with the state government for letting out a portion of the bigger house (which he would take on lease from the WBPCO-O) to one of its departments. On receipt of the information that the state Congress(O) was leasing out the western wing of the "Congress Bhawan" the chief minister issued an order requisitioning the building for use by the Small-Scale Industries' Corporation. The actual governmental take-over occurred on 11 July 1972.

The governmental possession of a part of the Congress Bhawan naturally led to a strong feeling of resentment by Congress(O)
people, though however, the day after the governmental possession took place, the then state Congress(O) general secretary, Asoke Datta, issued a statement to the effect that the governmental requisition had not affected the party. In a situation which other Congress(O) leaders described as "a partisan governmental aggression upon the democratic rights of an opposition party", Datta's statement appeared a bit queer.

Sen however managed the situation and quickly put up a united party stand against the requisition which he described as "the most unwarranted, unlawful and illegal way of doing things in a fascist fashion". He got Asoke Datta himself issue a statement on 18 July that the party would launch a satyagraha if the "Congress Bhawan" was not derequisitioned by the next three days.

What followed was, of course, a very laudable and intelligent form of mass protest action against a very powerful adversary. Under the joint leadership of P.C. Sen, Nirmalendu Dey, Abha Maiti and Asoke Datta, the Congress(O) volunteers started a continuous picketing at the gate of the requisitioned building from 21 July 1972.

Sen himself began a sit-in demonstration at the picketing spot and leaders of all other opposition parties were invited to address meetings held daily at the satyagraha camp site. The party's leaders in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, S.N. Mishra

and Mahavir Tyagi respectively came to Calcutta and addressed a big rally on 9 August 1972. The party projected itself as a minor opposition group being unduly deprived of its democratic right of functioning because of a revengeful, partisan attitude of the ruling party.

On 13 August 1972, Siddhartha Roy, the chief minister, announced the withdrawal of the requisition order with the comment:

In a parliamentary democracy the party in power has to be magnanimous... So no matter how untenable the point of view of the particular opposition party might be, if no matter of principle is involved, the government can take a broad view.27

The Assam riots and the Congress(O) In October 1972 the neighbouring state of Assam was witnessing a spate of anti-Bengali riots. The West Bengal Congress(O) found in these riots an opportunity to cash upon the resentment of the Bengalees over the incidents in Assam and "the apathy and indifference of the Central and West Bengal governments" (both run by the new Congress party). The state Congress(O) therefore preferred to launch an "Assam movement".

The experiment with the "Assam movement" however failed. P.C.Sen announced his plan to undertake a padayatra into the riot-affected area of Assam. But this immediately evoked a protest by his own party colleagues of Assam. Shiva Prasad

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Barua, vice-president of Assam state Congress(O), sent a telegram to Sen stating:

In case you ignore our requests (of cancelling the padyatra), I and three others from Congress(O) from Assam will undertake padyatra in Calcutta on December 25.28

The central party leadership was also worried over the move by the WBCC(O) and advised Sen to desist from executing his padyatra plan. Ultimately, the state Congress(O) could extricate itself from the uneasy situation because of an assurance by the Prime Minister that the Assam state government would be urged to take strong deterrent action to prevent the recurrence of disturbances that had taken place.

The Prime Minister's letter to P.C. Sen read, among other things:

There are already indications that the padyatra satyagraha which you propose will have adverse repurcussions. I earnestly request you to consider all these aspects and desist from taking any steps which would only hinder not help the larger cause.

The executive committee of the state Congress(O) then requested Sen to postpone the padyatra. The Assam government also ordered high-level administrative inquiry into cases of administrative lapse that might have taken place in dealing with the disturbances. Thus ended the Assam movement episode.

1973 - a sad year for the Congress(O) The two elections of 1971 and 1972 had made the state Congress(O) practically a

28 West Bengal Pradesh Congress(O) records. Also The Statesman, Calcutta 8 December 1972.
29 West Bengal Pradesh Congress(O) records.
non-existent political force in West Bengal. The only resource that the party could still bank upon was its septuagenarian leader, P.C. Sen, a former chief minister and a widely respected Gandhite. Sen tried his best to gear up the Congress(O) organization and at least, temporarily, he had succeeded. The foot-march demanding supply of drinking water in villages and the month-long passive resistance against the requisition of the party headquarters had been able to infuse into the otherwise demoralized Congress(O) ranks some amount of enthusiasm for oppositional agitations. But the party lacked an adequate number of young cadres who are indispensable for such actions. By the end of 1972, those who remained in the party were, mostly, old and aged comrades of the pre-independence days and a very few new recruits who had joined the party through personal connections of the leaders. These new entrants lacked a positive ideological orientation which alone can sustain political workers under adverse circumstances. The party in 1973 not only became small, but lost also its capabilities for launching opposition movement.

Of course, in 1973, the other opposition parties in West Bengal, particularly the leftists, were in no better shape. They too were, at least, apparently subdued. The most that the leftists could hope to achieve were the staging of a few mass rallies now and then and organizing a few stray industrial strikes. The CPI(M) was then actually trying only to maintain its existing organization by adopting a strategy of lying low against the Youth Congress's (youth wing of the ruling party)
militant onslaughts against its ranks. Only the past experience of the leftist parties of having worked as opposition and their ability to organize agitational activities since independence helped them to weather the difficulties they now encountered.

Defections from the Congress(0) The Congress(0) people had neither the experience of remaining in the opposition for the last 26 years, nor did most of them possess, as the leftists did, faith in a well-defined ideology. What Myron Weiner spoke about Congressmen of Kaira district in Gujerat in 1967 holds good even today:

Congress Workers occasionally refer to the ideology of the party, to socialism and especially to the Gandhian ideology—but the great strength of the party grows out of its functioning as political machine... It provides jobs, opens contacts to government, engages in social welfare activities and settles local disputes. Local Congressmen would resent the statement that the party builds itself upon patronage, but they speak with pride of the role played by the party in providing services to the local population. The terminology is not important so long as we understand what it is that the party members actually do. In short, the party is united by what its members do rather than what they believe.30

In West Bengal, the Congress(0) had ceased to be the "political machine". It could no more provide jobs, open contacts to the government nor even render the so-called "services" to the people. In contrast, its main rival, the new Congress had become, by 1973, a very powerful political machine. Its leader, Mrs. Gandhi, belonged to the "same old family" and claimed her allegiance to socialism and the Gandhian ideology.

Hence many Congress(O) activists now felt no qualms of conscience in leaving the party and joining the new Congress. The Congress(O) ranks began depleting very fast, steadily and surely.

**Factional Quarrels**  As the Congress(O) was becoming smaller and smaller every day, factional quarrels raised their ugly heads in the party. While discussing about opposition parties in Asia and Africa, a political analyst remarks:

> Discouragement about their (opposition parties’) prospects of growth not only keeps them small, it also makes them smaller by stirring up jealousies and disputes which are endemic in failing organizations. 31

The state Congress(O) now encountered such jealousies and disputes among party ranks.

For understanding the nature of the factional quarrel in the West Bengal Congress(O) we need to go back a bit in the past. In the undivided state Congress, from 1948 to 1969, Atulya Ghosh was the key figure, while his political “elder brother”, P.C. Sen was in the government, first as a minister and then as the chief minister. The two worked in close cooperation, but their understanding ruptured in 1967 when Sen attempted to dislodge the United Front government in September-October 1967 through a secret deal with Ajoy Mukherjee, the then chief minister.

After P.C. Sen became relieved of his governmental responsibility in 1967, he began to take a greater interest in the organizational affairs of the party. With him a large number

of former Congress M.L.As who till 1967, took a greater interest in the governmental affairs than in the party organization (and therefore clustered around Sen), now became daily visitors to the party office. After the 1971 election, Atulya Ghosh retired from politics and Sen became all-in-all in the party. Even after the exit of Atulya Ghosh, his followers continued to contribute to party activities as best as they could, but the state Congress(O) leader, P.C.Sen relied more on his new ring of personal followers than on the Ghosh-followers. The former associates of Atulya Ghosh began to feel eliminated from the process of decision-making in the state Congress(O).

After the 1971 election, Asoke Krishna Datta, a young barrister and a former secretary of the Congress legislature party became the general secretary of the state party. Before Datta had assumed the general secretary-ship, Nirmalendu Dey, a very close associate of Atulya Ghosh, was the most effective organizer-leader of the party. Though Dey held no office in the party after 1967, he controlled the party secretariat. P.C.Sen however had a positive dislike for Dey since he had opposed most stoutly Sen’s attempt at coalition-making with the Bangla Congress in 1967. Sen therefore attempted to curb the influence of Dey. Again, Nirmalendu Dey was the object of jealousy of many Congressmen because of the large powers of government and the party that he enjoyed in the past. The new general secretary, Asoke Krishna Datta, was one of these Congressmen who were opposed to Dey.
Till the 1972 general election, Dey and the former close followers of Atulya Ghosh fully cooperated with the new leadership that was installed in the party by P.C.Sen. But certain incidents that came to light during the Congress-Bhawan requisition episode brought to the fore the underlying differences between Datta and Dey and their respective supporters. Even, P.C.Sen himself became involved in the factional quarrel. Since the Congress-Bhawan requisition episode, the West Bengal Congress(O) became the victim of an intense bi-polar factionalism.

Congress Bhawan affair: On 11 July 1972, when the Congress Bhawan was taken possession of by the police, Nirmalendu Dey along with a few of his associates put up the first resistance. Next day Datta, the party's general secretary issued a press statement saying that the party "was not affected by the requisition". The background developments behind this curious press statement are quite interesting and would give us an insight into the causes of the factional quarrel that troubled the state Congress(O).

The "Congress Bhawan" though built with the resources of the undivided party and contributions raised by Congress leaders like B.C.Roy, Atulya Ghosh, P.C.Sen and others, was owned by an independent Trust, known as the "Janasevak Trust" which had a 5-member Board of Trustees and a 11-member general body including the members of the Board of Trust. The Board originally comprised of B.C.Roy, P.C.Sen, Atulya Ghosh, Bejoy Singh Nahar and Pannalal Sarnaogi. After the demise of the first and the last named members, Bejoyananda Chatterji and
Nirmalendu Dey were inducted into the Board in the vacancies of the deceased. P.C. Sen became its new Chairman and under his signature all transactions of the Board were conducted.

After the 1971 election, Sen found it very difficult to run the party office due to lack of funds. Therefore, in September 1971 Sen, through Asoke Krishna Datta's negotiation, agreed to lease out for a 50 year period the six-storey building of the Congress Bhawan to one J. Dalmia on a moderate rate of annual rent. Dalmia made an advance payment of Rs. 56,000/- in consideration of the agreement. After having secured the agreement, Dalmia began negotiating with the state government for renting out the building at a monthly rent of Rs. 30,000/-. The new Congress chief minister, S.S. Ray, on learning that the Jana Sevak Trust had agreed to lease out the building to Dalmia decided to requisition the building and then followed the anti-requisition agitation, which has already been discussed.

P.C. Sen had sent his signed lease agreement to Dalmia without Nirmalendu Dey's knowledge. Again, after the governmental requisition Asoke Krishna Datta issued his statement saying that the party was not affected by the requisition. These events enraged Dey and many Congress(O) workers who met Sen at the party office the day after the requisition took place, to air their grievances. At this meeting Manubhai Patel and

32 Harendra Nath Ghosh, Congress Bhawan and Janasevak Trust, Santi Mudran, Calcutta n.d., p.3.
33 The Statesman, Calcutta 14 July 1972
34 S.S. Ray's statement in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly made on 4 August 1972.
Ravindra Verma, two secretaries of the A.I.C.C.(0), were also present. Datta reportedly told the meeting that since the requisitioned house was the property of the Jana Sevak Trust and since neither the President nor the General Secretary of the P.G.C.-O (P.C.Chunder and himself respectively) was a member of the Board of Trustees, he felt that the party was not affected by the requisition.

However, to meet the situation arising out of the requisition, a hasty reconciliation was patched up. It was decided that P.C. Chunder, the state party president, would be made a member of the Trust Board in the vacancy caused by the death of Bejoyananda Chatterji (who had been assassinated in early 1971) and that the party would unitedly put up a resistance to the governmental requisition of Congress Bhawan. We already know how ultimately the Congress(0) agitation succeeded in getting the house de-requisitioned.

Contest between Dev and Datta From the "Congress Bhawan" episode, it became clear to Nirmalendu Dey and his associates that P.C.Sen did not take them into confidence and that he was capable of taking important decisions in collusion with Asoke Krishna Datta behind their back. Dey now felt that he and his followers should take a more active leadership role in the party to counter Datta's attempt at establishing a total control over party affairs.

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35 Harendra Nath Ghosh, op.cit. p.4.
36 Harendra Nath Ghosh, op.cit. p.4.
37 In-depth interview with a few of Nirmalendu Dey's followers like Himangshu Haldar, Kanai Ghosh and others.
Dey and his group took an active interest in the party's next agitation programme, the so-called "Assam movement", but became disheartened when Sen withdrew his proposed nagawatra plan. In late December 1972, during the all-India committee's meeting of Mrs. Gandhi's party in Calcutta, Dey organized a massive procession to demonstrate against the Prime Minister but this too failed to earn for the group the desired dividend.

Undeterred, Dey pursued his objective doggedly. In February 1973 he arranged a meeting of the presidents of the four Calcutta district committees of the party. This meeting resolved to hold a Calcutta city conference of the party in March 1973. Immediately did Asoke Krishna Dutta disclaim any association of the party with the proposed conference. The dispute went to the central party leadership level and Ravindra Verma, the all-India party's general secretary, came down to Calcutta. Verma succeeded only in getting a short postponement of the conference.

Arrangements for the city conference continued, but even P.C. Sen publicly denied his association with the conference. The state party secretariat saw in this conference an attempt to create a parallel party authority and therefore complained to the central leadership. The party president, Sadiq Ali, called Dey and his supporters to New Delhi and after a long discussion issued a statement:

... the leaders (who are planning a Calcutta district political conference) have assured me that the conference was being organized only to strengthen the party base in the state. I have accepted this assurance but have advised
the postponement of the conference because of the misunderstanding and tension that still prevails (sic).

The anti-Datta faction had a setback.

**Economic crisis: Party's Failure**

While the state Congress(O) was witnessing serious factional quarrel inside the party, the political situation was changing. And the changed situation demanded more effective political action on behalf of the party.

In West Bengal, during April-May 1973, there prevailed, so to say, an economic crisis. Famine condition prevailed in Bankura, Purulia and parts of 24 Parganas districts. The state faced an acute food shortage. In the statutory rationing areas the quantity of rice ration was reduced, prices of essential commodities were soaring high and thousands of starving villagers were flocking to Calcutta and the district towns. There was serious power shortage and many industrial units had to resort to massive lay-offs causing unemployment of thousands of industrial workers. Amid this crisis, the leftist parties were planning mass protest action.

But, in spite of its earlier assurance, the state Congress(O) failed to "stand by the people in their distress". Factional quarrels had intensified so much within the party that the organization had become practically incapacitated. In the students' wing, the two factions patronized two presidents of Chhatra Parishad(O). Asoke Krishna Datta declared that Sanat

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Mazumdar was "the duly elected president of Chhatra Parishad(0) recognised by the party", while Abha Maiti (a former minister) and Bimal Kanti Ghosh (a former M.P.), two close associates of Nirmalendu Dey publicly lent their support to Ashim Banerjee, the rival claimant of Chhatra Parishad’s(0) presidentship. Two Chhatra Parishads(0) began functioning.

Since the Dey faction held majority support in the state executive committee, Asoke Krishna Datta, the general secretary of the party preferred not to convene any meeting of the executive during January to June, 1973. This mode of functioning however could not continue for long and, therefore, P.C.Sen, now Datta’s mentor, contacted and influenced the central party leadership for a reconstitution of the state executive committee. On 3 July 1973, the national Working Committee of the party dissolved the existing state executive and appointed Sen as the convener of the P.C.C.(0) authorizing him to constitute an ad hoc state executive committee.

The influence of the Dey faction in the party was thus curbed by the office-holding Datta faction with the aid of the central party leadership.

Ad Hoc Committee for West Bengal Before the national Working Committee of Congress(0) took the decision of replacing the elected state executive committee, it had sent the seniormost party leader, Morarji Desai, to West Bengal to explore the ways

41 Resolution of the Congress(0) Working Committee meeting, Delhi 3 July 1973.
and means for solving the West Bengal factional dispute, Desai came to Calcutta twice and met the warring faction leaders. Even in February 1973 during the Gaya session of the party, Desai held long consultations with the group leaders but could achieve no solution. Desai later admitted to the author that "the factional quarrels within Congress(0) in West Bengal had no ideological basis but were simply power conflict between personalities." It was after Desai failed that the party's Working Committee okayed P.C. Sen's proposal for an ad hoc state committee.

On being authorized by the Working Committee, Sen appointed a 30-member ad hoc state executive committee. Nirmalendu Dey and all his friends excepting only Abha Haiti and Aparash Bhattacharya were excluded. Immediately did Haiti and Bhattacharya resign from the committee. They stated:

... many brilliant workers of the party who would be the most effective elements in building up the party organization in the state have been deliberately excluded from the ad hoc committee. This was done to serve the partisan interests of a narrow coterie.

The resigning members however made it clear that they were not leaving the party and would cooperate in movements that the party might launch.

Following the footsteps of Haiti and Bhattacharya, the president and secretaries of the 24 Parganas district party committee and many secretaries and important executive members

42 See Appendix III for a synopsis of the interview with Morarji Desai.

of the Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapur, Bankura and different Calcutta district Congress(O) committees resigned from their offices, though they retained their primary membership of the party. The members of the Dey faction thus made themselves "persona non grata" in the party and Asoke Krishna Datta had a complete grip over the party apparatus both at the state as well as district levels.

Disintegrative Impact of Factionalism

Factionalism within the state Congress(O) had its impact on the party activities. Particularly the disintegrative impact of factionalism now began to be felt by the party. About factionalism in the Congress party (undivided), Paul R. Brass remarks:

Factions and factional conflicts perform both integrative and disintegrative functions for the Congress party organization in Uttar Pradesh. The disintegrative impact upon the Congress is the more evident impact.\(^{44}\)

Brass studied factionalism in the Congress organization when the party was in power in U.P. The Congress party was then a huge "political machine" and enjoyed one-party dominance in U.P. politics. In 1973, the West Bengal Congress(O) had none of the advantages which the U.P. Congress party possessed when Brass studied it. Again the intra-party conflict in the WBPC(O) was a bi-factional one which, as Brass himself concludes, "tends to be extremely bitter."\(^{45}\) The net impact of Dey-Datta factional conflict, therefore, was a disastrous one upon the West Bengal Congress(O)'s performance abilities.


\(^{45}\) ibid., p.241
The party lost its initiative in oppositional movements. Here and there, now and then, the students' wings of the two factions would organize small demonstrations, dharnas or token one-day hunger-strikes at important crossings of the city's thoroughfares or in front of the U.S. or the U.S.S.R. consulates, protesting against price-rise, power-cuts or foreign intervention in Vietnam or Cambodia, but the party as such could not make its presence felt in the state's politics. On a few occasions, P.C.Sen along with Chunder and Datta would lead a few padayatras in the distress-stricken areas of the state as would Nirmalendu Dey, Abha Haiti and others organize rallies and demonstrations at places where their group had a stronghold, but, on the whole, the party seemed to have been atrophied. Most of the party cadres led a frustrated, ineffective existence.

**Factional conflicts in the ruling party** The ruling party, the new Congress was experiencing in 1973-74 intense factional quarrels. There was absolutely no threat to the party from the opposition forces; there was an all-round ideological consensus in the party but no authoritative leadership. Factional conflicts within the new Congress now assumed quite serious proportions. Incidents of bomb-throwing, armed assaults and stabbing among the ruling party cadres became almost a daily routine. The ruling Congress was torn asunder from inside because of intense factional rivalries.

But the state Congress(O) could utilize neither the ruling party's disunity nor the grave economic crisis in the state. The party passed well-intentioned resolutions and spoke in terms of satyagraha, non-cooperation and recruitment of volunteers for
launching a peaceful struggle but failed to act. The party even organized a satyagraha training camp in December 1973 but could do nothing more than holding a few public meetings. In these meetings, Sen and the party leaders called upon the people to prepare for satyagraha against “the stifling of democracy” by the ruling party and the state and central governments.

Emergence of Effective Opposition
In late 1973 when the opposition parties were still smarting under the impact of their disastrous defeats in the 1971 and 1972 elections and had lost practically all popular credibility, the rise of Jayaprakash as the spokesman of popular discontent against the corruption and misrule of the ruling party fundamentally changed the all-India political context. A political leader of legendary revolutionary fame which he had earned during the country’s independence struggle of 1942, Jayaprakash had shunned active politics since 1947. But now he felt he must act. Jayaprakash began touring different parts of India urging the people to launch a non-violent mass movement against the corruption and misrule of the new Congress government. Jayaprakash’s courageous emergence as the champion of the peoples’ cause during a period of an opposition vacuum and extreme economic distress was hailed by the common masses. The opposition parties like the Congress(0), the Jan Sangh, the Swatantra, the Socialist Party found in Jayaprakash a rallying point for united action against the government.

The West Bengal Congress(0) now tried to utilize the all-India opposition agitation, Jayaprakash’s movement and the railway

strike (which began on 8 May 1974) to its benefit. Alleging "fascistic violence", P.C. Sen extended his support to Jayaprakash's movement for a "total revolution" remarking, "... the only course left to the country is to wage a non-violent battle for the transformation of society". The West Bengal Congress(O) began holding meetings in support of the "Jayaprakash movement" and also adopted in its executive committee meeting, a resolution condemning "the harsh and provocative attitude of the government towards the reasonable demands of the railwaymen".47

The CPI(M) and other leftist political parties of West Bengal which had been "lying low" since their 1972 discomfiture now found in the new atmosphere of dissent, an opportunity to project themselves before the public. On 3 May 1974 nine leftist political parties under the leadership of the CPI(M) demonstrated at Esplanade East, Calcutta, against the "anti-people" policies of the government. More than 1500 leftist volunteers courted arrest by violating the prohibitory orders under section 144.48

In such a situation of tension, agitations and the potential emergence of a united opposition movement under the leadership of Jayaprakash, the Congress(O) held its A.I.C.C. meeting in Calcutta in mid-June 1974.

47 WBPCC(O) executive committee resolution (unpublished) dated 6 May 1974.
Bey-faction's virtual elimination. The Congress(O) now had a golden opportunity to act, but it failed because it was still ridden by factional quarrel. Such is the nature of factional jealousies within a party that in spite of the most pressing needs the warring groups cannot resolve their differences. Thus during the A.I.C.C.(O) session in Calcutta the WBCC(O) president, Chunder, refused to accept the offer of the members of the Dey faction for participation in the preparatory activities for the party's all-India session. He asked them to enrol themselves as members of the reception committee, positions which even ordinary citizens could acquire on payment of some donation to the party.

Not only was the Dey faction excluded from the reception arrangements for the A.I.C.C.(O) session, it even found many of its supporters eliminated from the all-India party committee itself. These Dey supporters therefore could not participate in the A.I.C.C.(O) deliberations. They were told that a new election of the A.I.C.C.(O) members from the state had been held by the ad-hoc P.C.C.(O). When the Dey faction challenged that such election could not be made by an ad hoc P.C.C., the Working Committee appointed its treasurer, Shanti Bhusan to conduct an inquiry. Shanti Bhusan reported:

There appears to be no reason why the AD HOC P.C.C. may also not be allowed to elect A.I.C.C. members when the same is the part of the work of the P.C.C. I am accordingly satisfied that the West Bengal AD HOC P.C.C. had acted constitutionally and also properly in regard to the list.

49 Correspondence between Abha Maiti and P.C.Chunder (unpublished) 10 and 11 April 1974.
of A.I.C.C. members from West Bengal.  

The Dey faction lost its battle. Even the central party leadership appeared inclined towards the office-holding faction in WBPCC(O) - the Sen-Chunder-Datta, coalition.

The Citizen's Committee

When the members of the Dey faction found that all doors were closed upon them, it would have been natural for them, in those days, to seek entry into the other Congress led by Mrs. Gandhi. But they did not do so, first, because most of them being pre-independence-day Congressmen were a bit "doctrinaire" in their attitude to politics and also secondly, because the new Congress was at that time not willing to take them in. S.S.Ray, the new Congress chief minister had clearly stated as early as in 1971 that persons like Nirmalendu Dey, Abha Maiti and others, would not be allowed entry into his party. The Dey supporters, therefore, did not leave the Congress(O) but at the same time they tried to evolve a separate platform through which they might operate.

By taking advantage of the popularity of Jayaprakash's movement against the ruling party, the Dey faction formed a so-called non-party forum under the name of "West Bengal Citizen's Committee to Fight Hunger, Corruption and Want". Ranadev Chowdhury, a leading Calcutta barrister, became its president and a few prominent lawyers, educationists belonging to no political party were included in the Committee's executive body. Abha Maiti

and Dilip Datta became the Committee's Joint Secretaries.

At a press conference in Calcutta on 6 July 1974, it was announced:

The West Bengal Citizen's Committee proposes to launch the basic struggle against corruption mainly through organizing public opinion against it and through launching peaceful democratic movement against corruption in public life wherever it occurs. The Citizen's Committee also wants to focus the citizen's right to be free from hunger and want and we intend to organize all forms of democratic movement to establish the fundamental rights of the citizens of the biggest democracy in the world.52

The Citizen's Committee publicly acknowledged that it had drawn its inspiration from Jayaprakash's movement. The Committee declared that it had been "very much enthused at the success of the anti-corruption movement launched by Shri J.P. Narayan in Bihar".53

Jayaprakash in Calcutta

In the meantime, in June 1974, Nirmalendu Dey had contacted Jayaprakash in Patna. It is learnt that Dey posted Jayaprakash with the developments concerning the factional quarrel inside the West Bengal Congress(O) and sought his guidance and assistance. Dey and his colleagues wanted to play their role in the movement against the ruling party.54 In June 1974, Jayaprakash had no organized following in West Bengal and he saw no reason why he should reject Dey's offer of cooperation. Jayaprakash agreed to

53 Idem.
54 Interview with Nirmalendu Dey.
attend two public meetings in Calcutta to be sponsored by Dey's followers. 
Jayaprakash first addressed a select meeting of University and College professors, teachers, lawyers and important citizens at a packed hall in Calcutta on 6 July 1974 and then another public meeting on 7 July 1974 at the Calcutta maidan. Both the meetings were well-attended. 
Jayaprakash was however very careful not to align himself completely with the Dey faction alone, but made a broader approach. On the first day of his visit to Calcutta, he conferred with the leaders of all opposition parties of West Bengal (the Congress-O, the S.S.P., the Jan Sangh, the CPI(M), the SUCI, the Forward Bloc and other leftist parties) on the prospects of a broad-based united opposition movement in West Bengal on the lines of Bihar and Gujarat Movements.55

The newly formed Citizens' Committee organized a few district committees. In Calcutta, the Committee's volunteers staged anti-price rise demonstrations and also tried unsuccessfully to resist the new bus-fare rise implemented by the government. The Committee also carried on a sustained campaign in support of Jayaprakash's movement against corruption and for dissolution of the Bihar assembly. 

The official leadership of the state Congress(O) also felt that they should utilize Jayaprakash's popularity for furthering their political aims. At the end of September 1974, Jayaprakash

again came to Calcutta on P.C. Sen's invitation, and addressed at Calcutta maidan a big rally jointly sponsored by the Congress(O), the Jan Sangh, the Socialist Party, the Praja Socialist Party, the Bangla Congress (Dhara faction) and the Sarvodaya workers.

The All India Scene  While carrying on his agitation, Jayaprakash had also been trying to forge a unity of the opposition parties. As a result of his efforts, a national Co-ordination Committee of all non-communist opposition parties, namely, the Jan Sangh, the Congress(O), the Bharatiya Lok Dal, the Socialist Party, the Akali Dal and the R.S.P. was formed on 26 November 1974.

Among the opposition parties, the CPI(M) remained till then hesitant about its attitude to the movement initiated by Jayaprakash. The central committee of the party stated in early December that it could not associate itself with the Co-ordination Committee because "it includes avowedly reactionary parties like the Jan Sangh, BLD and Congress(O)" though the committee felt inclined to extend limited support to Jayaprakash. A polit bureau member, Jyoti Basu, expressed his party's inability to launch a Bihar-type of agitation in West Bengal. He stated:

We are just not in a position to initiate this type of movement, for, if we do so, thousands of people will be killed in the State by the armed men of the ruling party.

56 Statement of the CPI(M) Central Committee dated 10 December 1974.
In late January 1975, the all-India pattern of opposition unity was attempted to be worked out in West Bengal. At a meeting of the representatives of the state units of the Congress(O), the Jan Sangh, the Socialist Party, the P.S.P., the Dharas-led Bangla Congress and the Sarvodaya workers, a joint platform under the name of Nava Nirjan Samiti (Society for New Construction) was formed with P.C.Sen as its convener. The Samiti decided first to organize a convention demanding protection of civil liberty and free and fair election in collaboration with the leftist parties.

After a few meetings of the two groups (NNS and the Leftist Combination), an agreed draft resolution for the convention was prepared. On 26 February 1976, the Civil Liberties' Convention was held in Calcutta under the presidency of an eminent lawyer, V.M.Tarkunde. Both P.C.Sen and the Marxist leader, Jyoti Basu, addressed the convention demanding restoration of democratic rights. The Citizens' Committee was not accepted as an organizer of the convention though the Committee's members were invited to participate in individual capacity.

The Civil Liberties Convention was the first occasion when leaders of the rightist and leftist opposition parties of West Bengal publicly united on a common issue. The basic differences however continued to persist. P.C.Sen made it clear on the very next day (of the convention) that "there cannot be any meeting of minds between his party and the CPI(M)."  

P.C.Sen's speech in the Assembly, West Bengal Legislative Assembly proceedings, 27 February 1975.
also specifically stated that though they might hold joint conferences with parties like the Congress(O), they would have no joint programme of action with them.

On 6 March, the Co-ordination Committee of opposition parties organized the "Peoples' March To Parliament". A big rally proceeded from the Red Fort and presented a charter of demands to the presiding officers of the two houses of parliament. All opposition parties excepting the CPI(M) participated in the rally. Nearly 500 volunteers of the West Bengal Citizens' Committee joined the "March" under the leadership of Abha Maiti.

J.P.'s Calcutta meeting disturbed. The ruling party had so long "ignored" Jayaprakash, but since the "Peoples' March to Parliament," the party leadership thought it necessary to put up a resistance to Jayaprakash. As a sequel to this new stand of the party, the students' and youth wings of the new Congress of West Bengal staged a demonstration on 2 April 1975 in front of the University Institute Hall in Calcutta where Jayaprakash was to address a meeting of students belonging to the opposition parties. The demonstrators "gheraoed" Jayaprakash's car and hurled stones injuring several people including a member of parliament. Jayaprakash could not address the meeting.

The same day, however, Jayaprakash addressed another meeting in the city. In this meeting, he severely admonished the opposition parties of West Bengal. He remarked:

The ground is ready for a total revolution in West Bengal. Nowhere in India are there such exploitation, unemployment,

poverty and a gap between the rich and the poor and frustration. Parties and personalities talk glibly of bringing about revolution. But so far nothing has been achieved.  

It was thus obvious that in spite of Jayaprakash’s three visits to the state between July 1974 and April 1975, formation of the NNS, efforts of the Citizens’ Committee and occasional rallies and demonstrations, West Bengal remained more or less unaffected by the trend of events in the neighbouring state of Bihar and the rest of north India.

West Bengal Struggle Committees Being perhaps influenced by the increasing public support to Jayaprakash’s movement, the CPI(M) changed its former stand with regard to the Congress(O). The CPI(M) leader, E.M.S. Namboodiripad declared in May 1974 that alliance or understanding between his party and the Congress(O) was possible in some states under certain conditions. The leftists were now thinking of united action with rightist parties.

The immediate impact of this change in the attitude of the leftist parties in West Bengal was a fresh reconciliation between the NNS led by P.C. Sen and the Left Parties’ Combination led by the CPI(M). The two groups of parties decided to hold a “Peoples’ March” in Calcutta demanding restoration of civil liberties to be led by Jayaprakash.

60 The Statesman, Calcutta 3 April 1975.

Jayaprakash visited West Bengal during 4-9 June 1975. He addressed big public meetings at Tamluk, Contai and in the suburbs of Calcutta on 5 June, led the Peoples' March in Calcutta. All these meetings and rallies were organized jointly by the NNS and the Eight Left Parties' Combination, the prominent participants being the Congress(O) and the CPI(M). The Citizens' Committee also took an active part in them. In all these rallies "the government, the ruling party and their friends" were condemned for:

... having unleashed planned and ceaseless attacks on the democratic rights of the people and civil liberty, for having indulged in terror and violence to stifle the voice of the opposition and different other opinions.62

Before leaving Calcutta, Jayaprakash announced the formation of two ad hoc state level committees - West Bengal Peoples' Struggle Committee (Jana Saneharsha Samiti) and the state Youth and Students' Struggle Committee (Yuba-Chhatra/Sangharsha Samiti). The constituent parties of the NNS were represented in these committees, but the eight leftist parties made it clear to Jayaprakash that "though they were interested in joint movement on specific issues, they were not prepared to join a political front with the NNS group of parties".63 P.C. Sen being the convener of the Jana Saneharsha Samiti also saw to it that the Citizens' Committee got no representation in these "Struggle Committees".

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62 Resolution adopted at the Calcutta rally addressed by Jayaprakash on 5 June 1975.

63 The Statesman, Calcutta 10 June 1975.
Gujerat results and Allahabad judgment

On 12 June, people all over India heard about two most important developments. In Gujerat the results of a recently held election indicated a clear victory for the opposition-sponsored Janata Front against the Congress. The other development was more important. The Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was unseated from the Lok Sabha by the Allahabad High Court in an election case. The Court however granted a 20-day stay of the order for giving an opportunity to Mrs. Gandhi to file an appeal to the Supreme Court.

The non-communist opposition parties which had already hatched up a unity among themselves through the "Janata Front", immediately demanded Mrs. Gandhi's resignation from the Prime Ministership and began a "Dharna" (sit-down-strike) in front of the "Rashtrapati Bhawan", Delhi.

On 16 June a deputation of the non-CPI opposition leaders waited on the President of India and submitted to him a memorandum requesting him to invoke his authority to direct Mrs. Gandhi to relinquish her office, the Prime Ministership. The ruling party was however in no mood to oblige the opposition.

Finding that Sm. Gandhi did not intend to resign her Prime Ministership, in an unprecedented move, the national executive of five non-CPI opposition parties—the Congress(0), the BLD, the Socialist party, the Akali Dal and the Jan Sangh—met in New Delhi on 26 June under the presidency of Jayaprakash and decided to set up a Loka Sangharsa Samiti (Peoples' Struggle Committee) with the Congress(0) leader, Morarji Desai as its chairman and the Jan Sangh general secretary, Nangji Deshmukh, as the secretary.
The opposition conclave also decided to send groups of 100 volunteers every day to the Prime Minister's residence with effect from 29 June 1975, demanding her resignation. A country-wide agitation or satyagraha was also planned to be organized.

In West Bengal, the eight left parties (led by the CPI-M) gave a call for a state-wide Bandh (general strike) on 20 June 1975 and all opposition leaders, P.C. Sen (Congress-O), Jyoti Basu (CPI-M), Haripada Bharati (Jan Sangh) demanded the immediate resignation of Mrs. Gandhi. The Bandh call however failed and no overt sign of popular resentment was visible.

In such a situation of political crisis, Mrs. Gandhi's government took an unprecedented measure. An emergency was clamped throughout India on grounds of "a likelihood of internal disturbance".

Since its miserable defeat in the 1972 assembly election, the West Bengal Congress(O) led a frustration-ridden existence with rampant factional quarrel within the party. The emergence of the Jayaprakash movement gave the Congress(O) an opportunity to play a meaningful role in the country's politics and the 1975 emergency put up a fresh challenge before it.