

LORE:

IRL Background:

Since Indian independence in 1947, the Indian National Congress (INC) had dominated national politics. Jawaharlal Nehru, the founding father of modern India, held power from 1947 until his death in 1964, leaving little room for rivals to challenge either the party or his popularity. After his passing, political competition remained weak.

The main opposition, the Communist Party of India (CPI), split in 1964 over both the Sino-Indian War and the wider Sino-Soviet split. The left wing opposed the war and called for diplomacy with the People's Republic of China (PRC), while the right wing supported the war and closer cooperation with the INC in resisting China. These disputes mirrored global ideological tensions: the CPI's right faction (later recognized as CPI by the election commission) aligned with Moscow, which backed the INC government, while the left faction (CPI(M)) argued for a strategy tailored to Indian conditions rather than Soviet directives.

On the right, the political field was divided between three parties: the secular, market-liberal Swatantra Party, and two Hindu nationalist organizations—the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and the All-India Hindu Mahasabha (AIHM). Swatantra gained some traction but remained confined to the former princely states and depended heavily on ex-princes' influence. Meanwhile, the BJS and AIHM, linked to the RSS (implicated in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination), were marginalized. By the mid-1960s, the two were diverging: AIHM embraced an explicitly extreme, far-right Hindu nationalism, while the BJS sought to rehabilitate its image by borrowing elements of Gandhian socialism.

Within the INC, Lal Bahadur Shastri emerged as Nehru's successor. His main rival, V. K. Krishna Menon—another Nehru protégé—had been discredited after India's defeat in 1962. Though Morarji Desai, leader of the party's right wing, contested the leadership, Shastri's reputation as a moderate helped him unify the INC's factions. The 1965 Indo-Pakistani War further consolidated support behind him. But in January 1966, Shastri died suddenly in Tashkent after signing a peace accord with Pakistan, throwing the party into turmoil.

In the succession battle, K. Kamaraj, a key power broker, allied with Indira Gandhi—Nehru's daughter and a former Congress president—to block Desai's ascent. Indira secured the prime ministership in 1966 and, with right-wing backing (strengthened by her earlier role in dismissing Kerala's communist government), held on through the 1967 general election. That contest, however, was disastrous for Congress: it lost 78 seats, its steepest drop since independence.

Adding fuel to the fire, in 1967, the INC was ousted from power in Uttar Pradesh by the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal—a coalition of agrarian, socialist, and BJS forces—which formed the government, marking the end of the BJS's decades-long political isolation in the state.

Moreover, in 1969 CPI(M) captured West Bengal. While the CPI(M) coalition soon collapsed, the development pushed the CPI into coalition with Congress to form a government in the state, while relations between CPI(M) and the INC grew openly hostile.

Meanwhile, tensions grew between Indira Gandhi and Kamaraj. Indira favored a populist approach, while Kamaraj preferred moderation. This dispute led to the INC party split 9 months after the election: Indira's INC(R) versus Desai and Kamaraj's INC(O). Desai built a "Grand Alliance" with the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) and the BJS, but Indira triumphed—helped both by her populist rhetoric and by electoral fraud later challenged by Raj Narain in the Allahabad High Court.

Upon coming into power, however, Indira soon scored a major victory: the 1971 war with Pakistan, which ended the genocide in East Pakistan and led to the creation of Bangladesh. Her popularity soared. Yet domestically she centralized power, rewarding loyalty over merit, while the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969–74) missed its growth targets. The 1973 Oil Crisis compounded economic stagnation, triggering unemployment and rising prices.

Jayaprakash Narayan attempted to unite the opposition into a common front. But divisions doomed the effort. CPI(M) leaders Jyoti Basu and Promode Dasgupta warned Narayan against partnering with the RSS-backed BJS. Still, Narayan valued their grassroots cadres and courted both the BJS and CPI(M). Ultimately, however, the communists refused to cooperate if the BJS was included, while the BJS and INC(O) rejected CPI(M) outright. With the CPI divided and the BJS+INC(O) possessing more seats, Narayan sided with the BJS and INC(O), forming the Janata Morcha in 1974.

Soon, the Morcha won a stunning victory in the Gujarat state elections on 11 June 1975, a further stab at the INC's position. Adding to this, the very next day, the Allahabad High Court invalidated Indira Gandhi's 1971 win and disqualified her from office. Facing mass protests and looming elections, she declared a state of emergency on 26 June 1975. The government dissolved the new Gujarat assembly, suspended elections, civil liberties, habeas corpus, and censored the press. Leaders from nearly every opposition party were arrested. Overwhelmingly, however, the arrests targeted the Akali Dal (a Punjabi Sikh party which had organized the first "Campaign to Save Democracy" shortly after the emergency was declared) and CPI(M). In both, nearly all registered members were arrested. Soon the press was censored and journalists arrested.

During the Emergency, Indira launched an ambitious but popular Five-Year Plan but also pursued deeply unpopular policies. Her government carried out mass forced sterilizations, targeting the poor, and her son Sanjay Gandhi oversaw "beautification" drives that demolished vast slums and displaced over 700,000 people in Delhi—its largest forced removal since Partition.

In January 1977, due to mounting public pressure and a belief that the success of her 5-year plan would outweigh public anger, Indira lifted the Emergency and called elections. Opposition forces—Akali Dal, BJS, DMK, INC(O), PSP, SSP, Swatantra, and others—united as the Janata

Party. CPI sided with Congress, while CPI(M), refusing to ally with the BJS or INC(O), chose not to contest against Janata except where the BJS, INC (O) and Swatantra Party factions stood. The result was a landslide: Janata swept the polls, CPI(M) solidified its hold in Kerala and West Bengal, and the Akali Dal triumphed in Punjab.

But the coalition's internal contradictions quickly surfaced. After Jayaprakash Narayan's death, Socialist and BLD leaders demanded the BJS cut ties with the RSS, especially after communal violence against Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. The BJS refused, splitting the Janata Party. By 1980, Indira Gandhi was back in power.

Yet what if events had unfolded differently? What if the Janata Morcha had become a genuine leftist popular front? To make that possible, several things would have had to change...

ITL Changes:

In this timeline, one major change occurs: the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) calls for a general strike following the All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) strike.

To give some context: In 1974, George Fernandes, President of the AIRF, led railway workers into action after decades of unresolved grievances. The strike began on 8 May 1974, amid an economic crisis, and brought the nation to a standstill. Unlike earlier strikes aimed at individual companies, this one directly challenged the government. The Indira Gandhi administration responded with force: police and military units suppressed demonstrations, and nearly 30,000 trade unionists were detained under preventive detention laws, including both union leaders and ordinary railwaymen.

In the aftermath, Ranendranath Sen, newly appointed AITUC President after S.S. Mirajkar's retirement, demanded a nationwide general strike. But AITUC General Secretary S.A. Dange—firmly pro-INC—quashed Sen's push, using his entrenched influence to sideline him. Sen was eventually replaced, and a CPI(Right) figure installed as General Secretary with Dange himself assuming the AITUC Presidency.

In this alternate timeline, however, Sen's call prevails. AITUC launches a general strike, provoking another harsh crackdown. Indira Gandhi, indifferent to Communist loyalties, treats CPI leaders no differently from CPI(M)—ordering mass arrests across the party ranks. With its leadership jailed, the CPI is forced to abandon its pro-Congress line. Facing repression as a united target, the CPI and CPI(M) reconcile and merge once more.

By the time the Emergency ends, the CPI emerges far stronger. Jayaprakash Narayan, heeding the warnings of Basu and Promode Dasgupta, allies with the Communists to form the *United Janata Morcha* (UJM; United People's Front). The BJS and INC(O), excluded from this front, instead form the *Bharatiya National Alliance* (BNA), later joined by Swatantra and other minor parties. In the ensuing election, Narayan's call for "Total Revolution" delivers a slim victory to the UJM, with Indira's INC second and the BNA third.

With the CPI winning the most seats within UJM, Jyoti Basu administering West Bengal, and Narayan's health failing, Promode Dasgupta rises to become Prime Minister of this new UJM.

What lies ahead for this new India? Wait for the next map to find out!