

India - The Left's Exit: Notes for Consideration of All Concerned

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History, at times, is a cruel reminder. Twenty years ago, 1989 signalled the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, as the Berlin wall crashed. Two years thereafter, the year 1991, watched how the USSR, together with the regimes in Eastern Europe, crumbled. Are we going to witness a repeat of this scenario, 2009 marking the beginning and 2011, the year of the Assembly elections in West Bengal, being the probable year of the erasure of the Left from Indian politics? If this catastrophe is to be prevented, what the Left needs today is not just introspection but a very bold rethinking on very fundamental issues, if it is prepared to read the writing on the wall.

I am scripting these notes not out of despair, but driven by a feeling of anguish and also a sense of hope for the future, because, for the genuine Leftists who harbour a future vision and are not just concerned with the tactical question of winning some seats in the electoral battle, 2009, indeed, marks the beginning of an era which Dickens described long back as the best and the worst of times. Understandably, for the Left these are the worst of times but they are also the best, for it is this grave crisis in which are embedded the possibilities for a rejuvenation of the Left, of a renewal, of a hope for the future.

It needs perhaps no explanation why some of the notes appended below specifically focus on West Bengal, because the naked truth is that the survival of the Left in India is, indeed, too heavily dependent on the survival of the Left in Bengal.

1. The issue of organisational lapses: Following the debacle of the Left in West Bengal, the mainstream Left parties, led by the CPI-M, have indulged in inquiring what went wrong, where and why. The initial statements and press briefings indicate that the losses are being attributed to organisational weaknesses of the CPI-M involving such questions as the alienation of the Party from the masses and the consequent failure to feel the pulse of the masses. This is based on two interrelated presumptions: (a) the Party line was basically correct; what failed was only the organisational machinery; (b) the Party is always right, the Party being the vanguard.

What needs to be recognised today is that in a liberal democratic and plural polity like India the theory of vanguardism has lost much of its relevance. What, on the contrary, demands to be highlighted is recognition of the Party as the mediator between its projected goal and the masses. This is precisely what Lenin emphasised in his last writings, when he talked about deepening the contact between the Party and the non-party masses or what Mao meant by the mass line.

2. The issue of arrogance, complacency etc.: It is being rightly stated now that one primary reason explaining the collapse of the Left in West Bengal has been arrogance, complacency and conceit, flaunted by the CPI-M in public at different levels, against which people have voted with a vengeance. This, unfortunately, is not the causal explanation, since this is a phenomenon which is the effect of something more crucial. This refers to the theoretical inability to understand the Gramscian distinction between domination and hegemony. A Communist Party's projected goal is to emerge as a hegemonic force whereby the consent of the governed is secured, and not domination, which is inextricably related to the use of force and violence for retaining its control. This is what

leads to degeneration of the Party, as it happened in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death.

To ensure domination, the Party needs surveillance, control, a tightly knit organisational network and an army of sycophants who indulge in celebration of mediocrity. These mechanisms supposedly lend credence to a system the result of which is show of arrogance and power. This ensures silencing the voices of difference to the minimum, which, ironically, corrodes the popular base of the Communist Party over the years.

That the Left in West Bengal has failed to emerge as a hegemonic force even after three decades is evidenced by the fact that about 50 per cent of the votes cast still go with the Opposition, although this is not reflected in the arithmetic of seats won by the Left.

3. The conspiracy angle: An opinion is being aired by a section of the Left leadership that its humiliating defeat in West Bengal is to be attributed to the conspiracy jointly hatched by a section of the media, together with secessionist and imperialist forces. While admitting that conspiracy will always be there to topple a Left regime, larger issues are involved here that demand appropriate responses. (a) Any criticism of the official position of the Left Front or the CPI-M, even from the position of the Left, is considered to be an exercise in anti-Leftism. This is a dangerous trend that has cemented the "we"- "they" divide in society, quite often flamboyantly aired by a section of the CPI-M leadership, which is wholly unacceptable. (b) It is true that over the years in a section of the media mounting criticisms of the Left are being made which relate to corruption, narrow partisanship that has given precedence to political loyalty rather than excellence, shielding of criminal elements etc. It is to be remembered that in the past too the Left has been the target of attack, but the grounds have been not moral, but political and ideological. This has simply been a manifestation of the degeneration of the Left in West Bengal, as power has killed its moral fibre. © In today's electronic age it is simply impossible to hide facts, howsoever unpalatable and unpleasant they are. When the TV visuals confirm the involvement of a Left hand in an act of criminality or a confession made by a leader of the Left that the Left Front, indeed, has lost its steam, it is simply useless and self-defeating to contest these footages and call the exercise a conspiracy.

4. A vote against Leftism?: It would be a travesty of truth to suggest that this vote has been necessarily a vote against Leftism and a positive vote for the ideology that the Opposition stands for.

This involves a number of issues: (a) For socio-historical reasons West Bengal, even today, has respect for a Left-Marxist culture, which does not, however, correspond to the kind of official Marxism/Leftism that has been harboured by the Left Front over the years. The problem is that the Stalinist mindset of the partners in the Left Front does not allow them to recognise and tolerate any brand of Marxism/Leftism other than the official version, resulting in alienation of a section of the intelligentsia in recent times over issues like Nadigram, Singur and other related issues. Many of these intellectuals are confirmed Marxists but they have rightly refused to toe the line of the Left Front Government on these issues. The result is that, while the champions of official Marxism consider the propagation of any other version of Marxism a threat, the dissenting voices feel that their space for autonomy and freedom is under attack. This has, in turn, led to an almost vertical division within the intelligentsia in West Bengal. On one side of the fence there are persons whose role is to celebrate and defend the official position, while on the other side stand many others, whose Left/Marxist credentials are simply beyond question, but who are opposed to the official version. They have been joined by a motley group of personalities under the umbrella of civil society and this has been a contributory factor to the toppling of the Left in West Bengal by the Opposition. Very recently, however, there has emerged a third space of intelligentsia, which is sharply critical of the official position of the Left Front on a variety of questions but refuse to be aligned with the Opposition too. (b) The mess created by the Left Government on Nandigram, Singur and other related issues has made an impression in public mind that it is no longer a people-friendly but a

capital-friendly government, dependent on an army of bureaucrats and police officers who, whatever be their lapses, would be shielded by the government and the Party. © Over the years, through a carefully crafted, but eventually suicidal, policy of appointments and nominations at high places, a so-called pro-government intelligentsia has emerged, many of whom, despite their fiery Left/Marxist utterances, have no credi-bility, their political past as well as credentials being quite dubious and unconvincing. It is the rise of these hollow men and women under the protection of the government that has considerably diluted the Left image of the Front and the government. (d) This explains the success of the techniques used by the Opposition in the election campaign, which involved their appropriation of the long tested slogans of the Left , going to the length of using Jyotirindra Maitra's unforgettable song "Esho mukto koro, andhakarer ei dwar (Come, free us from this citadel of darkness)" against the establishment. The most unfortunate thing is that it has worked, the Opposition gaining the credibility that it is the cause of the Left that has now been taken up by them, the Left in West Bengal having lost its colour long ago.

The crucial question, therefore, is: is this a verdict against Leftism/Marxism proper or is it that what has been rejected is the distorted and vulgarised Leftism/Marxism being practised? Does it not then constitute a signal for a rejuvenation of the true spirit of Marxism/Leftism, freeing itself from the trappings of Stalinist dogmatism as well as its pro-capital image that has gained ground so very quickly in recent years?

5. On unity and unanimity in the Communist Party: It has been a long practice in the Communist Party to vehemently deny differences within the Party, once a decision is taken, since it is believed that airing such differences would strengthen the hands of the enemy. This unanimity is ensured by a show of discipline and it is precisely this phenomenon which is again being witnessed, much to the amusement of the public, after the CPI-M Polit-Bureau meet, following the poll results.

Time has come to take a fresh look at this practice, at least for two reasons: (a) In a democratic polity like India, which has a vibrant media, it is simply foolish to suppress differences, groupings and factions inside a party, whether it is Communist or non-Communist. It is equally stupid to deny that personalities do matter inside a Communist Party, because factions and groupings thrive around prominent personalities, holding contending positions. Thus, Somnath Chatterjee's expulsion from the CPI-M is not just an act of expulsion of a Tom, Dick or Harry, despite attempts to portray it simply as a formal act of expulsion of a member who violated the Party line. (b) In the name of unity and discipline what actually happens is that the minority voice is crushed by the majority in the Communist Party, the effect of which is the so-called show of unanimity. This corrodes and weakens the Party from within, as the voices of difference get marginalised, although the farcical show of unanimity goes on.

6. Equidistance from the Congress and BJP and the theory of Third Front: The theory of building a non-Congress, non-BJP alternative via the Third Front, so vociferously preached by the Left, has finally collapsed. What was destined to happen and what sanity demanded has happened. Here, again, the question arises : what went so pathetically wrong? Several issues are involved here. (a) It was a dangerous error to develop the theory of equidistance vis-à-vis the Congress and the BJP, reminding one of the grave and costly mistake made by the international communist movement in the late twenties-early thirties, when Social Democracy and Fascism were considered virtually as twins. (b) The simple question that lurked in the mind of the electorate was: is the elusive Third Front, comprising a bunch of most dubious parties and personalities, the secular, progressive, anti-imperialist potentials of whom are yet to be tested, a more credible alternative than the Congress, howsoever bad it might be? © What the Left completely failed to comprehend, following its withdrawal of support to the UPA Government, was that, notwithstanding India's growing proximity to the USA, which, of course, has very dangerous portents for the future, India is not Latin America of the sixties and seventies.

It also failed to read the sophisticated strategic line of the Manmohan Singh Government. At one level, it stuck to the neo-liberal path of market-oriented reforms, which was aimed at generating employment and economic growth but which also gave birth to insecurity. At another level to contain the unsavoury effect of reforms on the people, it came out with legislations like the NREGA, the Forest Tribal Act and a host of other social welfare schemes which held out promise of a relief, particularly for the rural poor.

Besides, what the Left miserably failed to understand was that within the Congress, howsoever pro-reform it is, there are hardliners and softliners and what was necessary was to utilise this contradiction and take a positive attitude towards the negotiable elements. One only hopes that once the new government is formed, the Left will not sink further down by closing its doors on the Congress for the next five years.

7. Reinventing the Left?: Yes, that is now the only alternative open before the Left for its future survival and progress. It is high time now that the Left objectively rethinks its past and discards many of its stereotyped formulations, which simply means coming out of its Stalinist frame of thinking.

What needs to be infused in the mindset of the Indian Left is fresh inputs from the revolutionary humanist legacy of Marxism, associated with not just Marx, Engels and Lenin, but also Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg and many others who have never figured in the official discourse of the Indian Left.

The Left can survive only by breaking out of what it has been till now.

P.S.

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<http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/art...>

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