

CPI(M)'s Highs and Lows Under Its 'Media Savvy' General Secretary

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A detailed look at the party during Sitaram Yechury's tenure shows that significant changes have been underway, making a crucial impact on the country's larger political outlook.

In the last two decades, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has witnessed its highest highs and its lowest lows. From ruling three states and being the third largest party in the Lok Sabha, the CPI(M) lost West Bengal after almost four decades in power and has been electorally decimated at the Centre. In 2015, Sitaram Yechury didn't inherit the general secretary's post in the best of the party's time unlike his predecessor. The CPI(M) had bagged only 16 seats in the 2009 elections compared with the 44 it won in 2004. In due course, it was trounced by the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress in the civic polls in West Bengal held in June 2010. The first challenge for Yechury was to revive the party in West Bengal, when its defeat in elections seemed almost imminent.

Electoral conquests

West Bengal: Analysing the present political context, the CPI(M)-led Left Front believed that coming up with a broad-based alliance of all Left and democratic forces including the Congress in Bengal would work against a party that is undemocratic and corrupt. The Left-Congress combine ensured that seat adjustment materialises in terms of a shift in popular votes at the grassroots level, but the alliance miserably failed in its ability to mobilise anti-Trinamool votes, particularly the new Bharatiya Janata Party votes. The entire opposition vote didn't get consolidated in favour of the alliance. Yechury acknowledged that the party needs to introspect on the verdict in West Bengal but he also stressed upon the fact that had the party not entered the alliance, the results could have been worse.

Kerala: The second challenge was in Kerala, where factionalism between V.S. Achuthanandan and Pinarayi Vijayan was spoiling the party's chances of returning to power. The divide between the 'party' and the 'mass leader' had to be addressed in order to return to power. The election results gave a thumping majority of 91 seats to the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front. The party decided to name Vijayan as chief minister and Yechury regarded Achuthanandan as the Fidel Castro of India and claimed that he will be their guiding light. Since Kerala and Bengal elections were held simultaneously, [Yechury's remarks](#) on results were: "We are political soldiers, not astrologers. I am there in a war. In a war, you lose some battles, you win some battles. We won the Kerala battle, we lost the West Bengal battle".

Himachal Pradesh: It might not seem a victory to many but the CPI(M) managed to win one seat in the state after 24 long years when the party candidate [Rakesh Singha defeated](#) his BJP rival Rakesh Verma by almost 2,000 votes. This victory is more significant since it came in the background of a highly polarised contest between two major parties.

Tripura: Even Tripura faced a threat from the BJP for the first time in the electoral history of the state. The BJP carried an arsenal containing all sorts of uncivil, immoral, and anti-humanitarian weapons to gain victory. The 'CPI(M) model of governance' wasn't sold well even though the party ruled Tripura for 25 years. The mass struggles led by the party at the grassroots level, accompanied by rallies by prominent leaders, did not bring in good results and the general secretary seemed overconfident of his victory when he termed Tripura as 'BJP's waterloo' prior to the elections. It is a matter of fact that the BJP alliance was a composition of the Prime minister, various Union and chief ministers of the world's largest party, Congress, Trinamool Congress and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura, and the Left front was supposed to tackle all these on its own. It was an unequal fight.

Struggles in non-Left-ruled states

Maharashtra: June 5, 2017 was a noteworthy day in the history of Maharashtra since that day practically the whole of rural and semi-urban Maharashtra came to a halt as part of a Maharashtra Bandh to support the historic statewide farmers' strike that began on June 1. Maharashtra had never seen such a novel phenomenon of peasant protest. Hundreds of towns, mandis, roads, shops and government offices were closed down by lakhs of farmers who took to the streets in solidarity with the demands of the strike. In several places, effigies of the BJP state government were burnt. On June 2, before all these events, the CPI(M) general secretary had addressed a jam-packed press meet in Mumbai where he fully supported the peasant strike. Lately, just after the embarrassing results in Tripura, a time when journalists were busy writing the end of the CPI(M) in India, a wave of 35,000 farmers has marched into Mumbai under the banner of the red flag.

Madhya Pradesh: The CPI(M)-affiliated All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) mobilised farmers across the country to join in a united action of solidarity against the brutal killing of six people in Mandsaur district of the state and against the anti-farmer policies of the BJP government. In Madhya Pradesh, over a hundred farmers on protest were arrested in Rewa and Morena districts and over 1,500 protesters were arrested across the state. Yechury immediately raised the question if "we are all paying the Krishi Kalyan Cess to the central government so that it can buy more bullets to fire on farmers."

Rajasthan: Nearly 20,000 peasants had been protesting in Sikar district since September 1, under the banner of AIKS. The absence of effective opposition parties and the CPI(M)'s work on the ground resulted in attracting mass support even beyond its core farmer support base. On September 14, when almost 1.5 lakh people marched in solidarity with the [farmers](#), the [Rajasthan](#) government, responding to the scale of the stir, gave in and agreed to a debt waiver up to Rs 50,000 each, though [farmers](#) had sought a whopping Rs 39,500 crore.

Telangana: To provide an alternative to the existing bourgeois parties, Left and Ambedkarite parties in Telangana have formed into a joint front - Bahujan Left Front (BLF) - which will be contesting in 119 constituencies in the 2019 elections. The front was formally inaugurated in the presence of Yechury, Dalit leader Prakash Ambedkar, Professor Kancha ilaiah and a few others in a public meeting in Hyderabad. The CPI(M), Marxist Communist Party of India (United), Loksatta Party, Aam Aadmi Party and Majlis Bachao Tehreek, are among the 28 political organisations which are part of the front. With the ability to mobilise a wide range of social groups and channelise the discontent against ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi, the BLF looks likely to pose a stiff challenge to the ruling polity in Telangana. The CPI(M)'s initiative to unite Left and Bahujan forces will contribute to achieving the ideals of Ambedkar, Jyothiba Phule and Marx.

In Tripura, defying heavy rains, thousands had participated in the protests. Across Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, peasants had come

on the streets to express their anger. In Haryana, dharnas and protests had been held in nine districts which, in some districts, were converted to a gherao of the collectorates. In Punjab, roadblocks were held across the state and protests continued for a week with the same demands. Bihar, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Andhra and Telangana also witnessed similar protests. My assessment might be wrong, but I believe that the victories of the peasantry, under the general secretary of the CPI(M), present in non-communist, BJP-ruled states have inspired the peasantry across the country. The credit of these agitations definitely goes to the people who worked on ground, but there is no denying that CPI(M) has a press savvy general secretary after a decade.

Other developments

The most visible aspect of modifications under Yechury's leadership has been a shift in the party's style of communication. The party has become highly active on social media platforms, with Yechury himself making most of his Twitter account. For the media covering the CPI(M), it was always Yechury who was accessible to reporters. The former general secretary (Prakash Karat) rarely spoke to journalists.

A detailed look at the party after Yechury's election would show that significant changes have been underway, making a crucial impact on the larger political outlook in India. Unlike his predecessor, Yechury has maintained the relationships that late Harkishen Singh Surjeet (former CPI(M) general secretary) nurtured and has an excellent rapport with the Congress, Sharad Yadav's Janata Dal (United), Samajwadi Party and other members of the 'socialist' parties of the Hindi-belt. Being general secretary and a Rajya Sabha MP at the same time, Yechury has proved that even though electorally decimated, the party could play a role in bringing together the fractured and fragmented opposition, so much so that Congress president Rahul Gandhi offered support for his next Rajya Sabha term.

Yechury's last challenge was in the politburo since it was (and even now) stacked with Karat's supporters. There are rumours that S Ramachandran Pillai, a politburo member and Karat loyalist, will succeed Yechury as general secretary in the Hyderabad party congress in April this year. With his appointment, Karat's influence would continue to run the CPI(M). The 80-year-old Pillai is not a young man and would probably be a one-term leader. It is also rumoured that Pillai could be a 'placeholder' for Brinda Karat, who could take over as party chief in three years. If elected, Pillai would toe Karat's 'independent' line focusing on Left unity rather than an alliance with the Congress or another third front experiment for the next three years, undoing everything that Yechury did in his tenure. Any sweeping changes, in both party line and organisation, would prove difficult for him. The recent central committee resolution is the best example of this. But Yechury has been waiting in the wings for a while. Unlike Pillai, he is a familiar face both inside and outside the CPI(M), a political pragmatist with a work style quite unlike Karat's. Conflict, therefore, will be inevitable in the upcoming party congress.

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P.S.

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