

Elections in India

Message from West Bengal Panchayat Polls

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The arrogant Communist Party of India-Marxist [CPI (M)] leadership in West Bengal had predicted that the panchayat election in the state would serve as a referendum on the state government's 'industrialisation' programme. The word 'industrialisation' for them is, of course, only a euphemism for everything they have done to suppress the people's voice in, and over, Singur and Nandigram. The poll results are now here for everyone to see.

The CPI (M) has faced a veritable rout in East Midnapore, the district Nandigram is in. The party has also lost as badly in Singur in Hooghly district. For the first time in thirty years the party has lost control over four district councils and its control over two more district councils is clearly tenuous. More significantly, the grip of the party has become considerably weaker in the two lower rungs of the panchayat hierarchy almost all over the state. Far from endorsing the 'Brand Buddha strategy of industrialisation', the poll results have once again echoed the slogan "amaar gram, tomaar gram - Nandigram, Nandigram" (My village is Nandigram, your village is Nandigram), and that in the face of relentless violence, intimidation and manipulation.

The media spotlight is understandably on Nandigram and the issue of land acquisition. But the real story is indeed much bigger and deeper. The agrarian and livelihood crisis that pervades much of rural India is quite acute in rural Bengal as well. Here too, the below poverty line (BPL) list has become an opportunity for excluding the poor and rewarding the supporters of the ruling party. Implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is riddled with holes that deny the deserving people the promised 'employment guarantee' and minimum wages, but fill the coffers for the nexus of the rich and powerful that lords over the countryside. The public distribution system is known no longer for supply of subsidised foodgrains to the poor but for pilferage and profiteering by a corrupt dealer-leader-babu(bureaucracy) chain. And with the government pushing for reverse reforms, every sixth person who had once benefited from Operation Barga and land redistribution has already been deprived of his/her gains and rights.

Compounding the economic miseries of the people and the gaping holes and leaks of the delivery system is the atmosphere of institutionalised terror, domination and corruption that has now become the most hated hallmark of the three-decade-old CPI (M) rule in West Bengal. Nandigram is only the most horrifying symbol of this rot. The serial massacres and rapes did not happen just on the issue of land acquisition - they were the CPI (M)'s way of stopping a people from having their legitimate say. Viewed from the angle of the protesting people of Nandigram, the killings and rapes were the price they had to pay for having their say.

A mere statistical summary of the panchayat results does not convey the real political import of the developments in West Bengal. Statistically, the CPI (M) still controls all but mere four districts of the state. A little erosion here and a little dent there after thirty years of uninterrupted rule may appear quite 'normal'. But those who have been closely observing the social and political dynamics of West Bengal have no difficulty in recognising the great change that has taken place. The rural poor have revolted in a big way. Nandigram was one expression of that revolt, the ration 'riots' were another link in that chain and now the panchayat polls have provided a third major glimpse of the

same simmering revolt.

The CPI (M) may well see the result as further 'confirmation' of a grand 'conspiracy' against its rule – a grand coalition of the 'Ultra Left' and the 'Ultra Right' with the civil society jumping in, as 'analysed' by the party's recent Coimbatore Congress. Their ideologues will doubtless treat us with profound bits of 'analysis' on the coming together of the old enemies of land reform and the new enemies of industrialisation. And the fact that the Congress – whether of the Trinamool variety or the good old non-Trinamool variety – has emerged as the biggest beneficiary of the anti-CPI (M) revolt will surely prompt it to sharpen its anti-'reactionary' rhetoric. Ironically, however, while the panchayat votes were being counted in Bengal, top CPI (M) leaders in Delhi were busy celebrating the fourth anniversary of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in the company of Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh.

Reactionary rightwing forces in Bengal as well as elsewhere will definitely try to utilise the emerging political situation in the state as best as they can. But any serious analysis of the Bengal developments should begin with a critical look at the strategy and tactics of the CPI (M) itself. At one point of time the CPI (M) was known as the party which had established 'panchayat raj' in West Bengal ; today it is accused of imposing a 'cadre raj' on the people. The rural poor, for long the main support base of the party, are giving vent to their pent-up sense of betrayal and alienation. And if Muslims in West Bengal are also seen turning away from the CPI(M), it is not as though they have suddenly developed some new fondness for the Congress or the Trinamool Congress (TMC), which is till date a constituent of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), or because the Sachhar Committee Report has revealed their miserable socio-economic plight. It is primarily because the CPI (M) too has begun treating the community and its concerns much the same way as other ruling parties do.

We must understand that the panchayat vote in Bengal has not been for the TMC or the Congress, it has been against the CPI (M)'s wrong policies and priorities and the increasingly corrupt and undemocratic nature of its governance. And the motive force behind this change is not the traditional social base of the Congress, but the aggrieved and alienated social base of the communists. It is only through a sincere, firm and close integration with the rural poor that the Left can be rejuvenated and rebuilt in West Bengal and the CPI (ML) is determined to do all it can to realise this challenge.

P.S.

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