

The Collapse of the 'Left Front' in West Bengal and the Way Ahead for the Indian Left

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The inevitable has finally happened. The Left Front government of West Bengal, the longest-serving government in India's parliamentary history, has been trounced quite miserably in the recent Assembly elections. The defeat certainly has not come all of a sudden - all recent elections including the 2008 panchayat elections, 2009 Lok Sabha elections, 2010 municipal elections and several by-elections had clearly revealed that the CPI(M)-led dispensation had been losing ground quite alarmingly. The 2011 Assembly elections marked the culmination of this process of decline of the CPI(M) in West Bengal.

Large sections of the mainstream media, in West Bengal as well as elsewhere, have tended to treat the defeat of the CPI(M) and its allies in West Bengal as a turning point signifying an end of sorts for the Left in India. They also understandably rush to attribute it to the Left's dogmatic opposition to neo-liberal policies and Indo-US strategic partnership. The advice naturally follows that if the Left has to stay relevant it will have to shed its dogma and reduce Left politics to just providing better governance without challenging the policy environment and the politico-economic direction chosen by the ruling elite.

The problem with this analysis is that it has nothing to do with what has actually happened in West Bengal. In fact, the Left Front government of West Bengal had precisely begun to follow this much advised path of ruling class wisdom. A few years ago, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was the greatest darling of the corporate media, much like Chandrababu Naidu in his heyday or Narendra Modi, Naveen Patnaik and Nitish Kumar in their current phases. Some media houses had even enthusiastically elevated him to a new brand of Left politics in India, 'brand Buddha' as they fondly called it. The CPI(M) has not gone down in West Bengal resisting the LPG policies, it has just paid the price for daring to implement those policies by trampling upon the rights and interests of the rural poor and the labouring peasantry.

Let us look at the context and circumstances of the CPI(M)'s ouster in West Bengal. Its government has not been toppled by a hostile Centre. Nor has the ouster been scripted by the Tatas or some major corporate lobbies for being denied entry into West Bengal or being driven out of West Bengal through militant trade unionism. What has cost the CPI(M) its flagship state is not a feudal backlash against the party's much-trumpeted record of land reforms. Nor is it a revolt of an upwardly mobile middle class angered by the non-fulfilment of its consumerist dreams of globalised grandeur. On the contrary, it is essentially a peasant rebellion on the good old plank of land, livelihood and democracy which has gone on to produce this most spectacular electoral drubbing for the CPI(M).

If the dominant media analysis of the CPI(M)'s West Bengal debacle is totally misplaced, and the therapy suggested mischievously motivated, the CPI(M)'s own response is nothing but characteristically evasive and hollow. Ever since the peasant protests started in Singur five years ago, the CPI(M) dismissed it as an anti-industry campaign and accused whoever stood by the protesting peasants of Singur of being a Narodnik or Luddite. When Nandigram happened, the

CPI(M) called it an anti-Left conspiracy hatched jointly by the far-right and the ultra-left. When Lalgarh revolted against police atrocities, the CPI(M) made common cause with the Centre to unleash a combined paramilitary campaign. It is only after the drubbing in Lok Sabha elections that the CPI(M) started admitting that something had gone wrong and promised to rectify and bounce back.

But there was never any clear admission of major political mistakes, no sincere apologies tendered for the forcible land acquisition in Singur or the massacres in Nandigram and certainly no attempt at course correction. This is why Nandigram was repeated in Netaji and CPI(M) leaders continued to make arrogant boasts and several leaders went on to deliver vulgar sexist speeches reflecting a feudal-patriarchal mindset all through the election. The debacle in the Lok Sabha election was reduced to a simple statistical deficit of only 11 lakh votes and words went around that the deficit could easily be neutralized by ensuring a few additional votes in every booth!

Even now CPI(M) leaders talk in terms of bringing back the 'deserters' and regaining the confidence of the people who have been 'alienated'. There is absolutely no recognition of the sense of derailment that all sincere Left activists and well-wishers can feel so acutely and of the fact that what the CPI(M) is now confronting is its own increasing isolation and even insulation from the broad masses of working people and large sections of the progressive democratic intelligentsia, and not just the problem of managing a few 'dissidents' or 'deserters'!

Trying to put up a brave face, CPI(M) leaders now present the West Bengal debacle as a mere defeat in one election after seven victories in a row. They would like us to believe that the people of West Bengal had desired change just for the sake of it, perhaps because of some time-induced fatigue and there is nothing more to it. They also tell us that elections are just a part of their overall political activity, and a poor showing in one election has therefore no political implication. But however much they may try to downplay the impact of the Bengal blow, the fact remains that West Bengal is not just any average state for the CPI(M). For three and a half decades now, West Bengal was the biggest bastion of the CPI(M) and what the CPI(M) has just experienced in Bengal is not a normal election defeat as it experiences in Kerala in every alternate elections, but a veritable collapse of its 'impregnable fortress'.

We are reminded time and again by CPI(M) propagandists of their achievement in carrying out land reforms in West Bengal and establishing the panchayati raj in West Bengal. This inspires little conviction today when the CPI(M) is being indicted by the rural poor precisely for reversal of land reforms, eviction of peasants and share-croppers and large-scale denial of routine panchayat benefits to the deserving and the needy. It is quite like the Congress talking of bringing independence and parliamentary democracy at a time when the people experience growing US domination in every sphere and systematic assault on democracy through draconian laws and military campaigns!

Ironically, the West Bengal elections have not only extracted a heavy price from the CPI(M) for its shameless acts of opportunism and renegacy, they have also exposed the utter political bankruptcy of the Maoists. In the wake of the peasant revolt of Nandigram and the adivasi resistance of Lalgarh, Maoists had found a fertile political ground in the forested areas of the western region of West Bengal called Jangalmahal. They flowed with the growing tide in West Bengal, declared their support for Mamata Banerjee as the next CM and got sensational and often sympathetic coverage in the West Bengal media. But they were only interested in their kind of armed actions, indiscriminately targeting CPI(M) leaders and activists and derailing the powerful militant mass upsurge of Lalgarh in the face of heightened state repression. When Chhatradhar Mahato, the main surviving face of the Lalgarh movement decided to contest the Assembly election from Jhargram, the Maoists virtually disowned him and many of them projected it as a diversion that would help the

CPI(M) and damage the TMC's prospect! In the event, while the TMC candidate won the seat, Chhatradhar finished third with an impressive support of 20,000 votes.

The Mamata Banerjee-led dispensation has now taken over. As reflected in the thumping win of the TMC-Congress combine, one can clearly see expressions of a massive popular euphoria on the streets of West Bengal. Perhaps such early euphoria is quite understandable at this hour of change and transition, and there is undoubtedly an element of spontaneity in it, but one can also clearly discern the beginning of a very conscious, concerted and comprehensive campaign by the Right to use this euphoria as a veritable license to launch all kinds of attacks on all streams of Left politics and ideology. An aggressive rightward shift would of course be out of tune with the overwhelming spirit of the West Bengal verdict and revolutionary communists will have to boldly invoke and nurture the popular democratic core of the protest movements of the recent past to challenge and confront the unfolding rightwing agenda.

It remains to be seen how the CPI(M) proposes to reinvent itself as an opposition party in West Bengal. After 34 years of government-centric existence, the implications of the party being forced to go back to the people as an opposition party, and what is more, as a professed party of class and mass struggle, will be quite interesting to watch. For revolutionary communists and all sections of sincere Left forces, the present juncture is surely an hour of profound possibilities and challenges both within West Bengal and on the national political plane. The CPI(M) model of government-centric 'Left unity' has suffered an unprecedented blow and the time has surely come for the fighting Left to regroup and march ahead with the agenda of people's struggles. In December 2007, the CPI(ML)'s 8th Congress held in Kolkata had issued the clarion call: "People's Resistance, Left Resurgence". There has been no dearth of powerful struggles in the country during the last two decades of neo-liberal offensive, the Left can move forward only by forging stronger ties with the people and organically championing and leading the struggles of the people through to the end. And with the government-centric, CPI(M)-centric image of the Left getting a body blow, it is indeed time that the role of the Left as a consistently democratic and fighting force acquired greater prominence and the revolutionary Left came to the fore as the driving force of the Left camp in India.

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P.S.

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