

Role reversal in West Bengal?

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Of all the Assembly elections due or in progress in India, those in West Bengal are critical and of pivotal importance. They will determine the fate of the Left, a significant current in Indian politics whose intellectual and moral-political influence far exceeds its parliamentary strength. Most opinion polls and more cerebral assessments suggest that the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), will lose the elections.

That would in and of itself be a big upset for the Front which has set an international record by having been elected to rule a state the size of a major country for 34 years. But the Left's defeat will have an important qualitative dimension. It will represent popular rejection of a range of policies and practices and a certain political style associated with the Front for a decade or more. Yet, a victory for the Trinamool Congress, led by the volatile Mamata Banerjee, will not exactly mark a shift to the Right in West Bengal. In fact, Banerjee has stolen the Left's platform and its populism. Simultaneously, the Left Front has moved steadily and considerably Right-wards.

So what West Bengal is witnessing is a role reversal between the two major players within the same broad political script. If this sounds paradoxical, consider the following.

The Left launched land reform (Operation Barga) in the late 1970s, and instituted panchayati raj in the early 1980s. It also did a lot to build the base for agricultural growth. But the momentum ran out. The Front, in particular the CPM, got ossified and embedded into structures of governance based on hierarchy, patronage and corruption. Over a decade, the Front's government has pursued thoughtlessly pro-corporate policies while ignoring the people's basic needs and livelihood issues. The state's health and education indices have stagnated or fallen, knocking out its claim to inclusive development.

The instinctively conservative orientation of the Front's leadership under Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is brought out in the recent WikiLeaks disclosures in *The Hindu*. These say Bhattacharjee was "demonstrably animated and happy to meet" US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson in Kolkata in October 2007 and expressed support for globalisation, liberalisation and US investment. A cable quoted him as saying that the Communist parties have recognised that "there must be economic liberalisation". Communists must "reform or perish".

Bhattacharjee also reportedly Paulson that he advocates "more investment from large companies such as Boeing and Dow Chemical". When Paulson "raised Dow's legal legacy issue in Bhopal as a barrier to further US investment, Bhattacharjee responded by welcoming Dow to invest in the state's chemical hub". The "legacy issue" here refers to Dow's buyout of Union Carbide, responsible for the Bhopal disaster. The US has been pressing India to free Dow of the liability to clean up the Bhopal plant site of thousands of tonnes of toxic chemicals. Nationally, the CPM opposes this.

The cables regretted that Bhattacharjee's "ideological flexibility" has not tempered "the national CPM leadership in its hardline opposition to the US...."

The CPM's apex leadership had every reason to be upset with Bhattacharjee's neoliberal orientation. Yet, when the crunch came over the Front's brutal crushing of grassroots resistance at Singur and

Nandigram, it uncritically supported him, squandering a precious opportunity for course correction. Singur and Nandigram instantly became household words in India for the injustices of neoliberal policies pursued by a political current which ideologically opposes them.

Even before Singur and Nandigram, the Left Front had begun to face the wrath of its core support-base—peasants, landless workers and Adivasis—on the forced acquisition of land for Information Technology and industrial projects (which didn't materialise) and for posh housing in New Rajarhat; and corruption in the Public Distribution System. Adivasis in Jangalmahal under the leadership of Maoists defied the Front.

The Front had won an overwhelming 227 of the 294 Assembly seats in 2006. But, by the 2009 Lok Sabha election, it only led in 99 Assembly segments. It also lost recent local body election and by-elections.

Mamata Banerjee capitalised on the Front's failures and promoted herself as the leader of the Adivasis, landless workers and small farmers who got disillusioned with the CPM. She can be expected to adopt populist slogans and reverse some of the Front's policies if she comes to power. So West Bengal won't completely break with Left-of-Centre politics even if it rejects the Front.

Except for one difference. The Trinamool Congress will let loose vicious repression against the Left. Banerjee will find it hard to control the lumpen elements which dominate her cadre. Whatever the election result, West Bengal's politics is likely to remain fractious, volatile and violent for some time.

If the Left loses in Kerala too, its national-level decline will accelerate. It would be wrong to write off the Left as a social movement and a force in the trade unions, kisan sabhas and women's and students' organisations. But the Left will find it hard to reverse its decline unless it completely overhauls its politics, its strategy of mobilisation and its organisational structures.

It is clear that of all major political groupings, the Left has the most to lose in the coming elections. But it is not clear if it can learn from its setbacks and reinvent itself.

Praful Bidwai

P.S.

* Praful Bidwai blog. Wednesday, April 6 2011. Special to 'Financial Chronicle' :

<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2011/04/19/Role-reversal-in-West-Bengal>