

Can the Indian Left recover from its 2014 election debacle?

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Almost as incredible as the Left parties' electoral rout, which halved their Lok Sabha seats to their lowest-ever total (12, even counting two Left-backed independents), is their failure to come to terms with its magnitude, quality and causes. Instead of acknowledging the debacle as the result of deep-rooted flaws in its programmes and strategies, a massive leadership failure, and its alienation from the people, the Left first practised denial by alleging large-scale rigging, then admitted to its "poor" showing, and finally accepted its central leaders' "primary responsibility for the failure".

The CPM has shrunk to its worst national score, and a pathetic two seats (the same as the BJP) in West Bengal, which it ruled for 34 years. The sole consolation is its victory in tiny Tripura (two seats). The CPI and Revolutionary Socialist Party have been reduced to near-irrelevance with just one seat each nationally. The Forward Bloc has been wiped out. Worse, all them have lost not just votes, but chunks of their social base, to the BJP in a Right-wing wave they did little to resist. In Kerala, the long-standing trend of the Left winning alternating elections has been broken.

Yet, no heads have rolled in the Left. The handful of CPM leaders who offered to resign were told not to: unlike "bourgeois" parties, Marxists believe in "collective", not "individual" responsibility! Ideologues, who have long privileged "parliamentary cretinism" (Lenin) way above grassroots mobilisation, now argue, charlatan-like, that their leaders don't resign on the basis of election results: these are far less important than a failure to expand the party's "mass base".

But this denies that flesh-and-blood individual decisions have huge political consequences: Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's Singur-Nandigram-industrialisation-at-any-cost policy ravaged the CPM's already-feeble "mass base" in Bengal, and Pinarayi Vijayan's narrow-minded conservatism has visited devastation upon the Kerala party, whose chances of winning the 2011 Assembly elections he all but sabotaged. And what of the central leadership's responsibility/complicity in allowing the Left's drift towards quasi-neoliberal policies at the state level, which it rhetorically opposes nationally, and its dogmatic insistence on organisational Democratic Centralism, which brutally suppresses free debate?

There's stunning silence on these issues, now postponed to future central leadership meetings. The CPI, which is usually less dogmatic and more self-critical, does no better. All that these parties promise is a review of "the political line and organisational functioning... to take corrective measures", and forging "close links with the masses" to "conduct struggles" to defend their "livelihood interests", "secularism and democratic rights". How, and on what issues, this will be done isn't spelt out.

The only new, and welcome, element is the CPM's decision to enlist non-party "Marxist experts" to study the social-political impact of liberalisation to enable the party "to re-invent itself". Past experience casts doubts on how genuinely open the CPM would be to such independent analysis.

The Left parties' crisis is existential and comprehensive—encompassing ideological-programmatic perspectives, political-mobilisation strategies (to reverse erosion of their cadre, and trade union and

kisan bases), and about reviving internal democracy. Unless they undertake radical, brutally honest rethinking, and re-establish their once-redoubtable presence in grassroots struggles, they could go into terminal decline even if they win a few elections.

That would be a great loss for Indian democracy. The Left is virtually the only part of India's political spectrum with a commitment to the underprivileged and to emancipatory social change, which isn't mired in corruption, and has made rich contributions to our cultural, intellectual and political life. If the Left ceases to exist, we would have to re-invent it.

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P.S.

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