

India: The Left's bumpy road to revival

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Contents

- [Dissecting the decline](#)
- [Road to rectification](#)

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) held an organisational plenum for the first time since 1978, in Kolkata. The plenum, a platform to thrash out a reorientation of organisational strategy, was held at a time when the CPI(M) — and the rest of the mainstream Left — is at its weakest organisational and political strength in decades. This is more so in the State of West Bengal, where the party has undergone a precipitous decline, reflected in election after election since 2009.

Much of the talk around the event has centred on whether or not the CPI(M) will seek an alliance with the Congress in West Bengal — with cryptic but dissonant voices on the subject emerging from the previous general secretary of the party and the incumbent. Former general secretary Prakash Karat, in a recent article in the party organ, *Peoples Democracy*, had stressed the need for expanding the party's independent strength through mass mobilisation and a change in its organisational functioning in this regard. Current general secretary Sitaram Yechury, on the other hand, also stressed the need for flexible “united front tactics” to exploit “differences in ruling class parties” — a euphemism for a possible tie-up with the Congress against the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Trinamool Congress.

Specifically in regard to West Bengal, the talk of an alliance with the Congress is nothing new. For long, even before the first electoral debacle for the CPI(M) in parliamentary elections in 2009, sections of its West Bengal leadership have suggested this as a way to tackle the formidable and growing might of the ruling Trinamool Congress. Now the talk of an alliance has emerged again in the run-up to the state elections in 2016, as the CPI(M) faces not just a strong incumbent in the Trinamool but also the threat of a rising BJP. The Congress itself is in a slump of its own in the State and faces a similar conundrum; while the State unit prefers a tactical alliance with the Left Front, the party's central leadership has reportedly given the green signal for a tie-up with the Trinamool. If that indeed happens, the strident debate within the CPI(M) would be rendered pointless.

Dissecting the decline

While the talk of an alliance or a lack of it did dominate the coverage of the plenum in media discourse, the CPI(M) has rightly noted that an overhaul in its organisational functioning and direction of its “mass line” is in order for its revival. After all, the decline in the party's fortunes, especially in West Bengal, had been not just due to policy or governmental failures but also due to serious organisational issues that had piled up over the years.

Political scientist Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya in a recent book, *Government as Practice*, has in this author's opinion come up with the most plausible explanation for the Left's sudden decline from a very strong position of strength as late as 2006 in West Bengal. The author takes on the varied

explanations for this change in fortunes before coming up with his own. The “functionalist” explanation suggests that the party suffered defeats and a lack of confidence among the electorate because of fall in standards of governance. This does not explain why the electorate has reinforced its confidence in the present Mamata Banerjee-led government which has not been effective in bringing any vital change in governance for the better. The “structuralist” explanation alludes to the fall in support due to the failure of the Left Front-instituted client-patron system to arrest corruption and malfeasance by local patrons associated with the front. This does not, however, explain why the very same patrons seem to have shifted to the Trinamool and have delivered favourable electoral outcomes for the ruling party in the state.

The “ideological” explanation, most prominently offered by Left intellectual Prabhat Patnaik, argues that the reduction of the CPI(M) and the Left’s work into “mundane and pedestrian politics” in order to perpetuate its rule and its ignorance of its larger ideological project of transformative politics transcending present-day capitalism, was responsible for its overall decline. Mr. Bhattacharyya counters this by suggesting that the CPI(M) did not do enough in the task of transcendence that was possible in the “politics of small change” — in the way the party regulated the affairs of the State as a party of government in West Bengal. His argument is that the CPI(M) was so caught up in the process of preserving power that it refused to reinvent a process of change that came about after the reforms it initiated in the 1980s. Rather than utilising the quotidian nature of its engagement with the people to further change — by expanding the benefits of land reforms to improve the status of landless agricultural workers; by organising and working towards the improvement of livelihoods in the unorganised sector; by focussing on primary education and health; by involving its cadre from the lower segments of society in a way that they could be taken into higher leadership — the party was merely reduced to an arbiter of sorts, with decisions taken in a top-down manner, leadership remaining ossified and dominated by the upper castes and the focus restricted to winning elections.

Road to rectification

In the last six years, the CPI(M) has had the opportunity to analyse and rectify its structure and organisational thinking in a changing West Bengal. Yet, it has been unable to move away from the logic of what Mr. Bhattacharyya calls “governmentalism”. This has meant the limiting of the party’s work to sterile critiques of the Trinamool and its inability to mobilise opposition to the ruling party in the form of mass actions against corruption (the Saradha scam, for example) or failures in governance. In this regard, the plenum’s resolution to focus on categories such as the urban poor by forming neighbourhood associations, for example, suggests at least a serious rethinking, which requires to translate to actions on the ground.

Two years ago, this writer had the opportunity to visit the Marxist, writer and former West Bengal Finance Minister Ashok Mitra at his apartment in Kolkata. Mr. Mitra bemoaned the weak stature of the Indian Left and was sad that his prognostications about the precipitous fall in its popularity following the land acquisition controversies in West Bengal in the late 2000s came true. When asked as to what could possibly be a way out for the Left to win the support of the people in the State, he hearkened back to the early 1940s. The communists in Bengal were discredited for having taken an antagonistic position against the Quit India Movement by adopting an abstract political line that sought to support the Allied powers as the Soviet Union was under threat from fascism. Mr. Mitra reminded us how as a teenager then, he and his friends decided to engage in relief efforts during the Great Bengal Famine by organising under a generic student banner. Slowly but steadily by the dint of their work, the young communists managed to win back their standing among the people, he said. These are sage words, even if from a strong dissident voice and a critic of the CPI(M), that the mainstream Left party should heed.

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*<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-lefts-bumpy-road-to-revival/article8078108.ece?homepage=true>