

The Many Faces of the Indian Left - A backgrounder

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In India, even as prominent left parties falter, radicalism persists.

February 25, 2014: Prakash Karat is smiling for the cameras. Karat, the secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), has just announced the formation of an eleven-party “third front” for the upcoming national elections, meant to provide an alternative to the two dominant national parties: the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The new front includes four left parties and a motley assortment of regional parties. Though the front is supposed to be “secular,” six of the seven regional parties have allied with the Hindu nationalist BJP in the past; for many of them, jockeying for national power is far more of a priority than establishing ideological unity on issues like secularism, social welfare, and democratic rights.

March 10, 2014: The Third Front disbands less than two weeks after its formation, as regional parties decide to keep their options open. Karat, ever optimistic, asserts that the front will come back together after the election results are out.

April 9, 2014: While the CPI(M) struggles to patch together alliances, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) takes a different approach. Many years into an armed insurgency in the forested areas of central India, CPI (Maoist) has called for a boycott of elections in the areas under its control. Government officials allege that rebels have killed three soldiers who were guarding polling officials in the state of Chhattisgarh, where the party has significant strongholds.

April 24, 2014: In the neighboring state of Jharkhand, state security personnel and polling officials face another attack, again allegedly planned by Maoists. The officials are riding on a bus, returning from a polling station, when an IED explodes, killing eight.

These events, widely covered in the Indian media, give a vivid but skewed picture of the Indian Left and its relationship with electoral politics. The CPI(M) and the CPI (Maoist), despite similar names and common origins, represent the extremes of the country’s present-day Left. The CPI(M) is by far the largest, most significant left party in terms of cadre numbers and parliamentary success, but its commitment to revolutionary socialist transformation has long drained away. The CPI (Maoist) is by far the most powerful, most deeply entrenched armed resistance group in India, but it has become increasingly isolated from mass movements and deaf to criticism from within the Left.

Between these extremes, there is a long continuum, filled with many party and non-party organizations, committed to mass mobilizations, and marked by countless smaller struggles against state and capital. Some of these organizations trace their roots to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI(ML), which formed in 1969 and quickly splintered into dozens of pieces in the face of state repression. Outside this lineage, there are many other independent radical organizations, as well as myriad struggles against state-corporate projects of primitive accumulation and displacement.

While CPI(M) and CPI (Maoist) dominate the news, they should not overshadow the diversity, energy and depth of the Indian Left. In the face of an ever-stronger neoliberal onslaught, its forces have a long history to look back on – both to identify moments of triumph and inspiration, and to see where the movement faltered in the face of enormous obstacles and complex challenges.

CPI(M), CPI(ML), and CPI (Maoist) all have a common root: the Communist Party of India (CPI), which itself still lives on, though in severely compromised form. The CPI's prehistory reaches back to the early twentieth century, when young, educated Indians were first encountering Marxist ideas and sharing in the enthusiasm of the Bolshevik Revolution. The party developed fitfully at first, with small contingents working in different parts of a vast subcontinent, with considerable reliance on the Comintern and the Communist Party of Great Britain.

As the CPI sought to become more independent and build a mass base in India, it faced challenges that differentiated it from other political movements. Crucially, it had to be responsive both to an international communist movement and to a unique national situation. This burden weighed heavily on Indian communists, and at key moments, the party found itself facing an impossible choice between “two ways of losing,” in the memorable words of political scientist Sudipta Kaviraj.

Such a moment came in the early 1940s, when the Soviet Union exhorted the CPI to give unwavering support to British war efforts in the fight against international fascism. The timing of this call couldn't have been worse, as the Congress, under Gandhi, had just launched the “Quit India” movement, which called for strategic opposition to British war efforts *until* the British government guaranteed Indian independence. The CPI, as a small, relatively dependent member of Comintern, could hardly turn down the Soviet Union's request, but their unalloyed support of the British alienated them from the broader nationalist movement.

The party was able to rebound after the war, playing a leading role in various mass actions. In 1946, it organized a massive general strike in Bombay in support of Indian sailors who had organized a popular revolt against the Royal Indian Navy. Communists also spearheaded two major rural uprisings, in the Telangana and Tebhaga regions. However, by the time India became independent in 1947, the revolutionary wave had largely passed, replaced with the horrific violence of partition.

In post-independence India, the communist movement faced a puzzle that it has still not solved: how to build towards revolutionary change when confronted with, on the one hand, a functioning (if weak) democracy that has widespread popular legitimacy, and, on the other hand, a centralized, powerful state that is capable of brutally suppressing both violent and non-violent dissent. To dismiss Indian democracy as a total sham, the position of many on the radical left, is to underestimate the tenacity of electoral institutions and their popular support, as well as the system's ability to offer severely limited, but nonetheless tangible reforms.

To embrace the parliamentary path, however, is — more often than not — to slowly succumb to the logic of winning elections, forming coalitions and doling out patronage to supporters, as opposed to taking the risks necessary to change popular consciousness and build a mass base for socialist transformation. The Indian Left has tried both of these strategies, multiple times. In all cases, it has faced the wrath of an unforgiving state.

In 1951, after a series of defeats in the streets, the CPI decided to focus on electoral politics. The party did surprisingly well in India's first national election in 1951, and then, in 1957, won the state elections in Kerala, an unprecedented feat for a Communist party in a bourgeois democracy. For supporters of the parliamentary path, this was vindication.

However, for those wary of the lure of electoral success, Kerala also provided lessons. While the

government was able to implement land reforms at a level unprecedented in India, and build on its support for oppressed caste groups, it was soon making compromises that caused discomfort among party members. In the end, the central government could not tolerate even the moderate reforms enacted by CPI; it dissolved Kerala's government and temporarily imposed central rule.

The fall of the Kerala government set the stage for the turbulence of the 1960s, as the Indian Left was rocked by national and international currents of radicalism and struggled to stay united. In part, unity was difficult simply given the staggering complexity and diversity of India, on regional, linguistic, economic, social and religious lines. In addition to this unavoidable heterogeneity, the party was also wracked by ideological crisis, especially on the question of how to characterize the dominant classes in India in general, and the ruling Congress party in particular.

In a world suffused with Cold War binaries, both the Left and the Right struggled to come to terms with the Congress government and its rule under Jawaharlal Nehru. Western observers were sure that Nehru was a communist; the Soviet Union first treated him like a traitorous capitalist, then as a progressive socialist. The Chinese communists, when they split with the Soviets, declared that Nehru was a neocolonial stooge, a puppet whose strings were pulled by American capitalists. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear why Nehru and his government were so confounding; they had chosen a path that was capitalist and yet not directly under the thumb of American imperialism.

Within the CPI, a major tension emerged between those who shared the overly kind Soviet assessment of the Congress, and those who preferred the overly harsh Chinese one. A border war between China and India heightened these tensions. Finally, the Sino-Soviet split in 1964 gave Indian communists the international justification they needed to resolve their own internal feud. The centrists and leftists in the party separated from the more conservative faction, with the former becoming CPI(M) and the latter maintaining the name CPI.

Within three years, the CPI(M) faced its own internal discord, as its centrist emphasis on electoral politics and broad alliances alienated the younger, increasingly frustrated left base of the party. In 1967, a rural uprising erupted in the Naxalbari area, in the state of West Bengal. At the time, the state was led by a Left Front government headed by CPI(M), and the uprising was supported and strengthened by lower-level CPI(M) cadres who had built deep networks with landless agricultural workers, sharecroppers and impoverished peasants.

The Naxalbari movement was galvanizing. Students and urban intellectuals poured into rural areas in support of the movement. But the CPI(M) government in West Bengal, after some initial attempts at mediation, came down hard on the Naxalites. Wanting to prove its mettle as a "responsible" government, and increasingly viewing the Naxalites as rivals, the CPI(M) unleashed a wave of fratricidal violence.

In 1969, in this tense atmosphere, Charu Mazumdar, a Naxalite leader and former CPI(M) member, hastily formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), or CPI(ML), with the enthusiastic support of the Chinese. But by 1971, the initial set of uprisings had been crushed, first by the local CPI(M) government and then the central Congress government.

Mazumdar himself came under increasing criticism for his growing authoritarianism and his advocacy of the killing of individual "class enemies" like landlords and policemen. Further, the romantic notion of revolution, shared by many of the urban, middle-class recruits to the movement, had been definitively shattered, leaving behind the hard work of rebuilding a movement with a real mass base. All these factors led to the explosive splintering of the CPI(ML).

By this point, the main contours of the present-day Indian Left had emerged. The CPI and

CPI(M), nearly indistinguishable after the exodus of left cadres from the latter in the late 1960s, continued to follow a narrow parliamentary path. The CPI(M) has focused its energies on maintaining power in Kerala and West Bengal, instead of building widespread support nationally.

In Kerala, a CPI(M)-led coalition has alternated with the Congress for control of the state government. The party was able to enact land reforms and build networks with a range of marginalized groups, before the inevitable slide into questionable parliamentary compromises. In West Bengal, where the party has long been dominated by the Hindu *bhadralok* (or the well-educated, culturally refined, upper caste “gentlemen” of the state), the decline of the CPI(M) has been more precipitous. The party was in power from 1977 to 2011, a period of uninterrupted rule that spawned an entrenched patronage network that guaranteed the party’s winning electoral formula at the expense of more thoroughgoing change.

As threats to its hegemony gained force, the West Bengal government increasingly resorted to violence, intimidation, and repression. This coincided with the government’s embrace of neoliberal policies in the 1990s. The fact that it was a “Communist” party did not stop it from pursuing a policy of rapid liberalization (an irony not unknown in nearby China). The CPI(M) embraced public-private partnerships, attracted foreign investment by trumpeting its low-wage workforce, and established Special Economic Zones that allowed multinationals to avoid industrial regulations.

The nadir for CPI(M) was its attempt to acquire prime agricultural land in Singur by force and hand it over to the auto giant Tata Motors. The project sparked state-wide protests, and the CPI(M) responded brutally, killing a well-known teenage protester. A similar situation played out in Nandigram. Riding the wave of disillusionment and disgust with CPI(M), the opposition Trinamool Congress won the state elections in 2011.

While many in the national and international press gleefully portrayed this as the death knell of socialism in India, the CPI(M) was, in reality, voted out from the Left, as it had alienated its traditional support base and finally felt its censure.

The story of the CPI(M)’s state units must be contrasted with the party’s overall national trajectory. With the gradual decline of the Congress party, and the emergence of coalition politics at a national level, small parties found they could have disproportionate influence. This was the case with the CPI(M)-led Left Front, which gave crucial support to Congress when it came back into power in 2004. Due to pressure from its left, Congress was arm-twisted into passing social welfare measures like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Ironically, on a national level, the Left opposed the Special Economic Zone Act, while in West Bengal the state government was zealously creating such zones. Eventually, the Left dropped its support of Congress, in opposition to the government’s advocacy of a nuclear power deal with the United States. Congress got along just fine without the Left Front, highlighting its weakness; the mainstream Left parties may temporarily counter the worst excesses of neoliberal expansion, but they are, in the end, dispensable. They must rely on convenient alliances and questionable partnerships in which they have little bargaining power.

While the parliamentary Left has been bound to the logic of opportunistic compromise, the descendants of the CPI(ML), with their roots in Naxalbari, have followed a very different logic. Rejecting the Mazumdar strategy of individual annihilations, though not ruling out armed struggle altogether, many ML groups recognized the crucial necessity of building a stronger mass base and turned to just this work in the lean years of the 1980s. By 2004, though, when two of the most trigger-happy of the splintered parties merged to create CPI (Maoist), the emphasis on mass mobilization faded into the background, a victim to the escalating logic of an all-out People’s War.

Further, by this point, the struggle had been pushed into the deep jungles of central India, where the population is largely *adivasi* (indigenous) and more tenuously integrated into the economic and social life of India. The Maoists, while surely fighting on behalf of a harshly marginalized and dispossessed population, have moved further away from peasants' and workers' struggles, and thus have little connection to the broader Indian Left. In this scenario, the traditional Maoist strategy of encircling the city from the countryside looks hopelessly divorced from the reality of India.

While Indian newspapers happily follow the parliamentary bumbling of the CPI(M) and the violent tactics of the CPI (Maoist), they remain largely silent on those movements that strike at the heart of Indian capitalism. When they do choose to comment, it's to protest the supposed intransigence of the workers, who are harming the investment climate. This pattern has been especially evident in the industrial belt south of Delhi, where the automobile sector has a strong presence and a fraught history of labor unrest.

The workers' struggle at the factories of Maruti Suzuki, the largest automobile company in India, has been particularly protracted and radical. Like many struggles in this belt, it began with the quest of forming a union not under the thumb of management. This seemingly straightforward task, ostensibly supported by Indian labor laws, provoked corporate hostility, and a worker-controlled union was finally registered only after thirteen years of struggle. The media only started paying attention when violence broke out at a Maruti Suzuki plant in 2012.

A similar incident occurred at a different factory just a few weeks ago, as police officers, backed by goons armed with knives, attacked striking workers, injuring 150. In an all-too-familiar irony, the victims of the attack were subsequently arrested and charged with attempted murder. This brutal police action only found mention in one English-language newspaper. While the scant media coverage sensationalizes the occasional outbreaks of violence in the belt, it leaves out far more important developments: efforts by radical workers to build solidarity across sectors; workers' demands that go beyond narrow economic gains and emphasize the unity of contract workers and permanent workers; and attempts to tie the industrial workers' struggles to larger movements against primitive accumulation, especially in the form of Special Economic Zones.

The existence of such movements suggests that, for the Left, the real question is not whether to contest elections, but how to build popular support by connecting and strengthening anti-capitalist struggles. The CPI(M) and the CPI (Maoist) have taken opposite stands on elections, but neither has been successful with mass mobilizations on a national level, and neither is prepared to face the complexities and the uneven developments of Indian social and economic forces.

Compare this with the current state of the Right. Most commentators expect that the Right will gain strength in the coming parliament, continuing the rightward swing of the Indian polity. The Right has been successful in part because its political party (the BJP) is supported by an enormous organization devoted to extra-parliamentary mass work (the RSS).

In a bourgeois democratic country like India, contesting elections may be a tactical necessity for left groups, an important means of countering the electoral dominance of the Right and promoting a radical political platform. Yet the experience of the Left, in India and elsewhere, highlights the danger of treating parliamentary politics as an end in itself and losing sight of the goal of socialist transformation.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 05.12.2014:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/05/the-many-faces-of-the-indian-left/>

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