

The death of the Indian left

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The Left Front failed miserably at the last election. Does this mean there is no future for leftist politics in India?

Over the past few weeks, there has been much lamentation in progressive Indian circles over Bharatiya Janata Party's ([BJP](#)) electoral victory and its new five-year mandate. Much has been said and written already about the failure of the opposition to stem the rise of Hindu nationalism and offer the Indian voter a tenable political alternative and inspirational ideology.

But another, equally important, development has been mentioned only in passing: the collapse of the Indian left.

Just 15 years ago, the Left Front was the third-largest alliance in [India](#) in terms of vote-share with 59 out of 543 [seats](#) in the lower house of parliament. In the last election, it struggled to win five. Some have blamed this dramatically low result on the rise of Hindu nationalism and BJP's successful electoral strategies.

But the truth is, the Indian left has been dead for a while; this vote just made it official. And, just like the liberal and centrist opposition, it has only itself to blame.

Trading class struggle for elections

Leftist politics arrived relatively late on the Indian political scene. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was [founded](#) in 1925 by MN Roy. Given that British colonial authorities had banned all communist activity, building and consolidating the party was difficult, it never managed to establish itself as a strong enough power able to challenge the hegemony of the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress ([INC](#)).

After India became independent in 1947, the CPI embarked on pursuing two rather contradictory goals: to mobilise workers and peasants and to contest elections. In the late 1940s, the communists supported the rebellion of landless peasants in Telangana region - which at that time fell within the territory of the princely state of Hyderabad - and three years after its 1948 annexation by the Indian Union, they contested the first free elections in the southern state, posing a major challenge to the INC.

Then in 1957, the CPI won the state elections in Kerala (also in the south), thus becoming the first party not allied with the INC to rule a state in independent India. Internal conflicts within the party soon reached a climax and, in 1964, it split into CPI and CPI (M - Marxist), only to come back together a decade later in the coalition known as the Left Front in the national parliament.

The newly found CPI(M) experienced electoral success soon enough. In 1967, it headed an alliance of parties that won the elections in the eastern state of West Bengal and formed a coalition government. The same year, peasants rose up against large landowners in Naxalbari village under the leadership of some CPI(M) members and the unrest quickly spread across the state. This

prompted the government, including the then Home Minister Jyoti Basu of the CPI(M), to order a crackdown.

The Naxalbari uprising was a harbinger of what was to come: the parties within the Left Front led by the CPI(M) steadily moved away from the political ideals they purported to espouse and embraced electoral politics for the sake of staying in power.

Over the next few decades, the CPI(M) managed to entrench itself in power in West Bengal, [ruling](#) the state for 34 years from 1977 to 2011 and in Tripura, where it [headed](#) the government for 25 years until 2018. In Kerala, it had mixed success, being [voted](#) in and out of power at almost every five-year cycle of state elections.

Its early electoral success was very much due to the land reforms it undertook in these three states which put an end to feudal practices in agriculture. The reforms were indeed widely popular among the general public, especially peasants, but they didn't reach everyone that they should have. Economists Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee, for example, have [argued](#) that lower caste households, who were poorer than the average peasant, did not benefit as much from the reforms.

Gradually, the CPI(M) and its partners turned against the very people they were supposed to protect and represent. They [shut down](#) numerous factories, [evicted](#) small business owners and street vendors in the name of "beautification" of cities, and [seized](#) land forcibly from farmers to sell it to the biggest capitalists of the country - among other regressive policies.

Having betrayed leftist-minded voters and not being able to rely on their electoral support, the CPI(M) and its allies took to crafting mechanisms of social and political control to secure re-election and entrench itself in power. At the polls, it often engaged in fraudulent [behaviour](#) to secure votes; in the streets, it resorted to brutal [force](#) to silence dissent, even when it was coming from the working classes.

In 2009, the CPI(M)-led government in West Bengal requested reinforcements from the central armed forces and reached out to Israel for help in its crackdown on the tribal [movement](#) in Lalgarh. And just last year, their [burned](#) burned tents and shelters of farmers protesting the state government's forcible acquisition of land in Kerala.

In the end, the party failed not only to lead a constructive social and political movement while in power, but also to promote leftist ideology among the masses. Meanwhile, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) - the extreme right-wing group that serves as the ideological backbone of the BJP - was able to set up primary and secondary schools in villages and suburbs in CPI(M)-dominated areas and grow its grassroots following.

An upper-caste, high-class, capitalist left?

Over the years, the Left Front led by the CPI(M) shed members who were committed to communist ideas and the revolutionary aspirations of the working classes. Many of those who remained did so for the sake of power and self-enrichment, some eventually becoming [millionaires](#). CPI(M) leaders, such as former Chief Minister of West Bengal [Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee](#), increasingly grew friendly towards big corporations, changing tax policies in their favour and welcoming the implementation of anti-worker legislation such as the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Act introduced by the central government.

The party failed India's lower caste population as well. The CPI(M) to date does not have a single [Dalit](#) leader in its highest decision-making body. Kerala, where the CPI(M) still holds power, has experienced an [alarming increase](#) in attacks on members of the lowest castes and tribes. In addition,

the CPI(M) has miserably failed to promote equity and mobility of Muslims as well as women within its own [party ranks](#), let alone among the general population in the states it ruled.

On matters of national importance, the Left Front has also failed to live up to its own ideological standards. In 2006-2007, it publicly opposed the US-India nuclear deal, arguing that it went against India's national interests; yet leaked cables [published](#) by WikiLeaks showed that CPI(M) members told US officials that the party would not oppose a related bill in parliament. On the Kashmir issue, the Left Front has also displayed remarkable hypocrisy; rhetorically, it has criticised brutal crackdowns on civilians, but in effect, it has not recognised Kashmiris' aspirations for self-determination.

As a result of all these, the leftist electorate has progressively shrunk. Most voters at the grassroots have switched to the BJP, which has managed to appeal to a large section of the poor and the downtrodden, and has successfully convinced them that religion matters more than food.

Can the left be resurrected?

If the Indian left is ever to come back on the political scene, it would have to come from the grassroots, particularly from landless peasants, tribals and lower castes. They are the most oppressed classes in the Indian context and yet the most resilient and rebellious as well.

Historically, these people have consistently resisted state power, [before](#) and [after](#) independence, and [to date](#). They have fought against [mining corporations](#), protected their lands and struggled for [self-governance](#). Clearly, in the absence of a well-defined and structured working class as per the Marxist definition, only these politically conscious lower castes and tribal landless farmers are ready to lead a communist movement in India.

It may sound utopian to some that communist politics can be resurrected through land and rights struggle, but that is because we, the [complacent elite liberal Indians](#), lack the ability to imagine political resistance beyond the walls of parliament. For decades, we have not left our comfort zones, and have continued to imagine a peaceful, gentrified and comfortable revolution in which one can participate just by voting, watching television debates and posting on social media.

But if we can learn anything from the last election and the past five decades, it is that the road to a leftist revolution does not pass through parliament.

Indeed, the future of the left lies in the vast political energy and organised resistance that exists within the toiling lower caste tribes and landless farmers in the heart of India.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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