

India: The Left In Its Labyrinth

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It's time for the Left in India to do a serious rethink, else it will perish. The excesses of one single year have led to this situation, writes Praful Bidwai

THE INDIAN LEFT has in a single year managed to do through its own actions what all its opponents could not accomplish over eight long decades: namely, damage its credibility as a force which speaks for the underprivileged, the excluded and the wretched of the Indian earth, and which upholds the values and practices of inclusive democracy. This is starkly evident in the two major states where it rules: West Bengal, and to a lesser extent, Kerala.

In West Bengal, 2007 witnessed forcible land acquisition for a car factory in Singur, two planned episodes of armed violence in Nandigram, starvation deaths among long-unemployed tea-garden workers in Jalpaiguri and dirt-poor Adivasis in Purulia and Bankura. Besides, there were food riots in nine districts against corrupt ration shop-owners linked to the CPM, Rizwanur Rehman's mysterious death amidst a party-police-business nexus, and the expulsion of writer Taslima Nasreen in place of a principled defence of her fundamental rights to the freedom of belief and expression.

2007 was no ordinary year. It marked 30 continuous years of the Left Front's rule in West Bengal - a tenure unmatched in India and probably in the world. Nowhere else have Communist parties been mandated in free and fair elections to rule a country or province the size of West Bengal (population 80 million) for three decades. This is a tribute to the relevance of Left-wing politics. In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front came to power with an impressive majority, but now faces a bleak prospect primarily because of serious infighting within the CPM, and pressure

from party state secretary Pinarayi Vijayan to follow pro-rich neoliberal policies, which are alienating the vast majority. The stench of scandal hangs heavy in Kerala, with lottery scams, sweetheart deals with shady businessmen, and expropriation of Adivasis. In the next Lok Sabha elections, the LDF may well lose the bulk of the seats it holds.

Nationally, the Left parties, comprising the CPM, the Communist Party of India, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, are set to shrink in their parliamentary representation, and more crucially, their moral and political influence. The CPM is likely to be worst affected. This could reverse the one-and-a-half decades-long trend under which the Left survived the international collapse of Soviet-style socialism, retained much of its moral and intellectual capital, and in many cases, extended its influence - defying the tendency towards a decline of Left-wing politics and a surge of the Right in most parts of the world, barring Latin America.

Neither the Left, nor the CPM in particular, has a strategy to resolve the ideological, political, and organisational crisis it faces. The plain truth is the Indian Left is less and less able to articulate a vision of social emancipation and present alternatives to corporate-led globalisation with all its enormous economic imbalances and social distortions. The Left must rethink - or perish. The Left's achievements must not be underrated. The greatest include land reform, an unblemished record of communal harmony and peace, stable, relatively clean governance, panchayati raj institutions, and above all, politicisation and empowerment of the masses. No other political current can claim to be such a principled upholder of democratic traditions and values. If the Left didn't exist in India, we would have to invent it!

In West Bengal, Operation Barga gave 2.3 million cultivators tenancy rights, and accounts for more than one-half of the total. The state also witnessed a 210 percent increase in literacy and a halving of infant mortality. Urban poverty ratio declined to 14.8 percent, well below the national average (25.7 percent).

However, the Front's record in some other respects is poor, as the official Human Development Report (2004) admits. Public spending and access to health services have stagnated. Some indicators - immunisation, antenatal care, nutrition among women, and number of doctors and hospital beds per lakh people - are below the national average. West Bengal has not opened a single new primary health centre in a decade.

RURAL POVERTY decreased between 1983 and 1993-94 at an annual rate of 2.24 percentage- points. But the decline has slowed down to 1.15 points annually. To compound matters, W. Bengal has the lowest rate of generating work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme - a mere 14 person-days per poor family, against the national average of 43, in place of the promised 100 days a year.

Worse still, according to the National Sample Survey, "the percentage of rural households not getting enough food every day in some months of the year" is highest in West Bengal (10.6 percent), worse than in Orissa (4.8). An alarming indicator is the number of school dropouts in the 6-14 age group. At 9.61 lakh in West Bengal, this figure is even higher than in Bihar (6.96 lakh). Of India's 24 districts which have more than 50,000 out-of-school children, nine are in West Bengal.

Yet another dark spot is the Front's failure of inclusion in respect of the religious minorities. Muslims form 25.2 percent of the state's population. But their proportion in government employment is an abysmal 2.1 percent, even lower than Gujarat's 5.4. This represents, sadly, the downside of the LF's record of protecting the minorities against communal violence. Clearly, West Bengal has a long way to go before it can become a model. Regrettably, its leadership's priorities have shifted towards elitism. It now obsessively promotes industrialisation at any cost, at the expense of peasants and workers. It has set its mind upon neoliberal projects like the Singur car factory and Special Economic Zones.

The results of the neoliberal orientation were evident in Nandigram in March and again in the first half of November, when the CPM forcibly "captured" two blocks, over which it had lost

control. The bulk of Nandigram's people - including many CPM supporters - got disenchanted with the party because it tried to impose an SEZ on them, earmarked for Indonesia's Salim group - a front for General Suharto's super-corrupt family. The SEZ plan was tentatively abandoned under popular resistance, led (but not exclusively) by the Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (BUPC). But the CPM started a campaign of intimidation of ordinary people, turning thousands into refugees, and resulting on March 14 in a murderous attack on villages, accompanied by arson, loot and rape. The attempt failed. CPM-BUPC clashes continued in recent months, and pressure grew to call in the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). To pre-empt CRPF intervention, CPM cadre launched their second bid to capture "Nandigram, turning it into a "war zone". The rest is history.

Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya presents the violence as a spontaneous clash between two organisations, in which the BUPC was "paid back in the same coin". In reality, this was a clear case of abuse of the state police, and its subordination to the CPM. The CPM treated its political adversaries as another country's enemy population.

This does not argue that the BUPC does not have goons in its ranks. It certainly does. But their power could not have matched the clout of armed CPM cadre backed by the state. Nandigram- II was a grievous blunder, which betrayed the Front's own core constituency. No argument about "provocation" by the opposition, or a "conspiracy" between the Right and the Extreme Left, can justify the gunning down of innocent peasants.

Unfortunately, the CPM leadership has learnt few lessons from Nandigram. It remains obsessed with GDP-ism and boasts that Bengal has the highest growth (8.55 percent) of all states. It has ruled out any rethinking on neoliberal policies. Even CPM general secretary Prakash Karat says: "We have to adopt industrialisation. We have to compromise. Industrialisation cannot be achieved without the help of capitalists like the Tatas." This approach is creating a rift, for the first time ever, within the LF and threatens to

weaken its greatest collective strength: unity. The approach could eventually turn the Left into an elitist, Social Democratic entity favoured by the rich and middle classes. That cannot be the future of the Left as a viable and relevant plebeian force.

The CPM must decide whether it should fight for radical social change, or merely manage capitalism Chinese-style, however honestly. If it chooses the second option, it will go into historic decline. It must also make a decisive break with the undemocratic organisational culture it has inherited, which punishes dissidence and encourages a "my-party-right-or-wrong" attitude. Unless the Left undertakes ruthless self-criticism, it can't effect course correction.

P.S.

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