

The Left Front and the United Progressive Alliance

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A Bourgeois Government Sold With Left-wing Wrapping Paper

The elections of 2004 witnessed in India the reversal of a decade-long trend. While no party or pre-poll alliance won a clear majority, voting patterns revealed deep popular hostility to neoliberalism. The ruling NDA lost seats. The most vocal champions of computer led growth (for in India in recent years the IT sector has been viewed as the key to modernisation) - the Telugu Desam party government in Andhra Pradesh, a key NDA ally, as well as the Congress government in neighbouring Karnataka — both suffered disastrous defeats, as provincial elections had also been called in these two states. The left won its biggest ever block of seats - 61. In Kerala, the ruling Congress led front was wiped out. In West Bengal, however, after 27 years of left rule, the Congress did reasonably well. It picked up 6 seats (NDA partner Trinamul Congress, a split off from the Congress, went down to 1) and received a significant share of the popular votes.

Lacking a coherent anti-neoliberal alternative, people voted as rationally as possible. They showed a clear hostility to neoliberal policies by the high votes and seats given to the left, not so much for what it has done, but for what it has said it will do. But this was followed by the cobbling together of an alliance, the United Progressive Alliance, and the decision of the left parties (the Communist Party of India - Marxist, the Communist Party of India, the Revolutionary Socialist Party of India, and the Forward Bloc) (1) to support this alliance “from outside”. The electoral results have been interpreted in many ways, but the foregoing interpretation can be proved not only by the fact that the most staunch champions of neoliberalism all were trounced, but even more, by the presentation of a left-centre programme by a right-wing led alliance.

The Congress, the historic party of the Indian bourgeoisie, is quite rightwing. Present Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was the one who opened India up to neoliberalism 14 years back. Present Finance Minister P. Chidambaram in his previous stint as Finance Minister had been applauded by big capital for presenting what they called a “dream budget”. That is what makes the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance such an interesting reading. It would be legitimate to describe the whole thing as a fraud, but a successful fraudulent action has to be based on popular acceptance. From that point of view, the CMP is a very carefully written text. It promises six areas where new directions are to be charted out. These are:

Preserving communal harmony, resolutely opposing communalism
Ensuring sustained, employment oriented economic growth
Enhancing the welfare of farmers, agricultural labourers and workers
Enduring gender equality
Ensuring equality for socially disadvantaged groups
Promoting productive forces by unleashing popular, creative energies.

These all mean just nothing, but can be explained in a very left manner. *Frontline* magazine, edited by N. Ram, who is close to the CPI(M), carried an article that welcomed the CMP as a step forward. (2) The article concerned claimed that the CMP is committed to upholding a secular polity, that it is paying special attention to education, that it has spelled out its commitments to disadvantaged classes and social groups, that it has welcome corrections to the servile pro-imperialist foreign policy of the previous government, that it will focus on employment, food security, and so on. To go beyond such platitudes, we need to start by asking what the CMP did not promise.

All the opposition parties had loudly denounced the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). After the utterly false arrest of Syed Ahmed Geelani, a university teacher in Delhi, and his death sentence in a POTA court (since set aside by the high court), it was clear that in the name of fighting terrorism, the NDA government had enacted a law that drastically curtailed the democratic rights of all Indians. The POTA itself had been brought after an earlier law, named Terrorism and Disturbed Areas Act or TADA, had lapsed. But the CMP offered no general amnesty for TADA/POTA detainees.

Despite all talk of harmony, the CMP does not even promise natural justice (bourgeois justice) to the victims of the Gujarat Genocide. (3) Despite the Supreme Court indictment against the Narendra Modi government of Gujarat, the CMP steers clear of taking a strong stance, since it is well known that the Congress has repeatedly, in the past, used what is nowadays called a 'soft-Hindutva' political line, that is, it has soft-pedalled secular commitments, it has pandered to Hindu communal sentiments without becoming violently ant-Muslim like the BJP, because it feels that the Hindutva campaign has definitely made the sense of being part of a common Hindu community a factor in electoral politics and it wants to cash in on that feeling. In the first few months, the government has shown in a number of ways how it wants to compromise with Hindutva. Perhaps the most publicised case is that of the history writing issue. Rewriting history has been central to the RSS project. Its attempt to build up a unified Hindu identity involves projecting Muslims as the eternal vile other.

This has resulted in the RSS regularly attacking secular, modern historiography, especially (but not only) Marxist scholarship. As far back as 1978, the RSS, then part of a coalition government at the Centre, had sought to stop a number of books by prominent historians, like Bipan Chandra, Romila Thapar, Ram Sharan Sharma, and others. This time, Union Minister for Human Resource Developments Murli Manohar Joshi, a committed RSS activist, did get his henchmen in the National Council for Educational Research and Training and the Indian Council for Historical Research, to pull out a number of school text books and to halt the publication of several volumes of documents in a series entitled *Towards Freedom*. Just to give a few examples from the RSS sponsored school books: An ancient Indian astronomer was virtually made to have fully done Newton's work. The role of the RSS and of Hindu Mahasabha leader V. D. Savarkar were whitewashed (both had advocated loyalism to the British in the 1940s, and both were implicated in the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, Savarkar escaping conviction only on a technicality).

The Russian revolution was called a coup d'etat. Hitler was praised. When the UPA government came to power, historians demanded the immediate withdrawal of those books, written by people who had no academic standing in the eyes of their peers (the Indian History Congress having been the strongest critic). Instead, the government decided to ask a committee to write "corrections" to the offending texts. This was followed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh bracketing the RSS with

what he called “left fundamentalists”, by which is nowadays meant the leading professional associations for the simple reason that they were thus attacked by the RSS and the attack was accepted at face value by the bourgeois media. This apparent neutrality actually dilutes the RSS strategy, and makes it appear that serious historians (who are often quite divided over different issues) who accept a secular historiography and communalist hack-writers are both biased, and it is therefore possible and even desirable to draw a mean between these two. This is a concession of a significant order to the RSS.

At the economic level, the single biggest blow to toiling people by the previous government was the destruction of the public distribution system. For many years, basic foodgrain, as well as a few other items, were distributed to all through the PDS. Everyone was entitled to a ration card, and not only the very poor, but even those often misleadingly defined as middle class, benefited by the supply of relatively cheap rice, flour, pulses, kerosene (fuel oil) etc. The WTO agreement was used as the plea to dismantle the system. The usual argument is that it gives subsidy to undeserving people. (4) The traditional demand of the reformist left has been for an extension of the PDS, usually encapsulated in the slogan “14 essential commodities must be supplied through fair price shops”. But the CMP stuck to the old line of the BJP-NDA, and made no promise of universalisation of PDS (Public Distribution System) as demanded by the Left.

One of the most debated issues throughout the past 14 years was the privatisation of the public sector, partly by open privatisation, partly through disinvestments. The CMP makes it evident that both will continue, but the controversial Disinvestments Ministry will be wound up. This is a tactical readjustment, which will in fact assist the process. By publicly creating a disinvestments ministry the BJP had drawn too overt an attention to a process strongly disliked by the working class, as well as much of the salaried white-collar workers. The same work will now proceed silently.

It has been stated that profit-making Public Sector Undertakings are “generally” not to be privatised (i.e., they will be in particular cases). Profit-making concerns are defined as those which can withstand all competition. Profitable PSUs, which turn non-competitive in face of sharpened international competition thanks to ongoing liberalisation, may thus enter the ‘For Sale’ list any time in the future. And profit-making and not-making is not simply decided by a free play of market forces, contrary to the myth peddled in the bourgeois media. Under imperialist and Indian private capital pressures, repeatedly, steps have been taken to drive down the profitability of public sector undertakings.

The Electricity Act 2003 will be *reviewed*, not *repealed*. Private investment will be encouraged in this sector. As a result of this Act, utilities are being privatised and the rates for ordinary people going up, in the name of stopping ‘cross subsidies’ (which means the rates for big business are being brought down).

Given the fact that it was the left that played a crucial role in cobbling together the UPA, the commitments made by the CMP concerning labour and labour laws are worth looking at. The UPA rejects the idea of automatic hire and fire. This is quite different from saying that jobs will be protected. A mechanism will be prepared to regulate hiring and firing, and this will be hailed as a step forward from automatic hiring and firing. The CMP also promises that reform of labour laws will continue. For the last decade and a half, the bourgeoisie has been screaming for reform of labour laws. By reform of labour laws, they mean reducing job security for that minority of the Indian working class which has it, making it tough for trade unions, especially class-struggle oriented trade unions to function and depoliticising trade unionism. The CMP does promise that workers will also be consulted, but then, it would not be difficult to get INTUC (Congress-led) or BMS (RSS-dominated) leaders to sit in. Over the last five years, the INTUC and the BMS have shown their willingness to foot drag whenever united action by trade unions, building up for a general

strike, have been proposed.

The CMP promised 100 days of employment (no regular jobs) per year in public works like road construction to be provided not to every jobseeker but to only one “able bodied person” per family. This was not reflected in the union budget. And there are plenty of examples, such as the existing Employment Assurance Scheme, which prove that these promises are so much scrap paper. It has been promised that this time there will be an Act. This is mere quibbling. Who will implement the Act? There is a Minimum Wages Act, but rural wageworkers do not get minimum wages as per the schedules in this Act. And furthermore, even if this was perfectly implemented, one wonders how a family of five, for example, can survive for 365 days on the pittance that will be paid for 100 days to one member of the family. The promise is important, as is the promise to bring forward a comprehensive legislation for the welfare of agrarian workers, only if left militants take this as a campaign issue, to insist that the government must implement these within a definite time frame, and that should it not do so, the left parties must refuse to support the government. There can be no question of either pointing to these promises as reasons for supporting or accepting the CMP itself, or the UPA government by revolutionaries. And there can be no proposal to the effect that since the CMP makes these promises we should give the government the benefit of the doubt and wait a bit. Any concessions will be wrung out of the bourgeoisie through a sustained mass movement.

A similar case can be made out for foreign policy and defence. The left was quite willing to swallow a programme that remained silent on the imperialist invasion of Iraq. One of the crudest forms of US imperialist intrusion, permitted during the Vajpayee regime, was to allow the FBI to open an office in New Delhi. The CMP makes no promises, even, about shutting it. Soon after assuming office, Manmohan Singh contacted and conferred with Brajesh Mishra, the main architect of the US-Israel-India axis, and followed this up with conferring with Vajpayee before meeting the Pakistani Prime Minister. The logic is that foreign policy is a matter of national interest so there should be no party division. As though foreign policy is not made with specific interests in mind. As though domestic and foreign policies can really be separated. In defence, continuity came with a massive hike in defence spending in a budget that simultaneously lowered health and education funding. A special education cess was declared, but simultaneously, general allocation for education was lowered. Then, after the budget was passed by parliament, came the announcement that the money collected from the education cess would go into a general pool rather than to targeted educational expenditure.

Thus, the nebulous expressions of joy by soft left journalistic commentators are seen to be a cover-up. But since supporters of the CPI(M) could argue that journalists like Atherya do not reflect the views of the CPI(M), it is useful to look at the CPI(M) itself. On 16th September, the CPI(M)'s Bengali language daily newspaper *Ganashakti* carried a report of a meeting in Bangalore, where a World Bank official had said that the CMP was a good programme, and had also said that the left would not be a problem in India's governance. This pat in the back from the World Bank, published smugly, sums up the real face of the dominant social-liberal left. Even Prabhat Patnaik, a leading CPI(M) ideologue, wrote a fairly effusive commentary. “The Programme does represent a shift of direction away from neo-liberalism...The dependence of the government on support from the Left would ensure that it would not make a complete volte face on its commitments embodied in the CMP in the matter of economic policy....The least that can happen in this respect in the short-run therefore is a “freezing” of “reforms” with some measures to alleviate the peoples’ hardships...”. (5)

Why should the CPI(M) take this kind of stance? Outside India, where it still projects a radical image, even in India, in many parts of the country, where it is viewed as a clean, honest, reasonably committed communist party, its soft-peddalling over the UPA and its first four months' activities are bound to raise questions. Yet in fact, there has been a growing convergence. This can be understood by looking at twenty-seven years of left front rule in the province of West Bengal.

CPI(M) in West Bengal - The Agrarian Question

The CPI(M) led Left Front holds a global record for winning six consecutive provincial assembly elections in West Bengal since 1977. But over the years, its record has clearly been one of managing capitalism, not of evolving any kind of strategy for transforming it. As the bulk of the population is even now rural, we will begin with its rural and agrarian policies to show why there is no significantly different "West Bengal model".

According to the CPI(M), state power in India is in the hands of a bloc, including big capital, landlords and imperialism. Looking at this power bloc, the declared policy of the Left Front in the early years included distributing land to the landless, providing security of tenancy to sharecroppers, expanding production by ensuring that peasants get seed, fertiliser and loan, raising minimum wages for agricultural labourers and ensuring that peasants get proper value for agricultural commodities produced by them. Three other points emerge from two pamphlets issued respectively by the government and the party, entitled *Land Reforms in West Bengal*, and *Significant Six Years of left Front Government in West Bengal*.

These are - to provide institutional loans to sharecroppers and those who are getting surplus land, so that dependence on moneylenders is reduced, to organise cheap irrigation, and where that is not possible, to provide subsidy and institutional loans so that improved cultivation is made possible, the abolition of colonial land revenue system so as to let out of the tax net those who own less than a certain amount of land, and to impose a progressive tax, and finally, to start a food for work programme so that poor peasants who do not get work in certain seasons get alternative employment. With this perspective sketched, we can examine the achievements. The pamphlet *Significant Six Years* claims that in the first six years, in the normal years food grain production was much better than in the Congress era. In other years production followed the national pattern. Now if the government refuses to accept responsibility or those years when production did not go up, or actually went down (three years out of the six under discussion) then why should we accept its claims for the good years? Why is it not rather a case of the normal pace of capitalist development? In particular, we should note that 1976-77 had seen a countrywide decline in agricultural production, so it was easy to show a rise in terms of percentage, taking that as the base year. Moreover, if the relief, land distribution, seed distribution, subsidy for irrigation, etc were to mean anything real, then the disaster years should be the ones when a left ruled West Bengal would have shown a big difference with the rest of the country, ruled by the bourgeois parties.

Regarding rural wage labourers, the same pamphlet asserted that between 1977 and 1982, their wages rose by 22%. But it was clarified that only half the wage was paid in cash, the rest in kind. Since the price of foodgrain actually rose less than the price of industrial goods, the effect was that real income of the agricultural labourers had actually declined.

Concerning land revenue, landed property valued upto Rs. 50,000 (valuation of the late 1970s, roughly equivalent to \$5000 of that period) was freed of revenue payment. According to the pamphlet we have twice cited, this meant that not only poor peasants, but also a section of the rich peasants were taken off the tax-payers' list. What was the logic for this enrichment of kulaks? None was given, but the effect can be easily understood.

The CPI(M), emerging from the Stalinist CPI, was a very strongly Stalinist party. Its programme was one of a two-stage revolution. But did it promote even the idea of a peoples' democratic revolution by its governance of West Bengal? The first point to make is, the experience of the twentieth century makes it clear that only small-scale production cannot achieve lasting progress in agricultural productivity. Only a progress toward cooperative farming of some kind shows a forward motion. A

special weakness of the left movement in India has been its failure to hold up an alternative model. In rural and agricultural development, a class-struggle policy would have meant not relying on the government machinery, but using temporary control of that machinery to let class organisations, like the peasant organisation, to develop class based cooperatives. The land distributed in small plots, where loan, seed, fertiliser aid could not be adequately utilised, would have been better developed through cooperatives. This class-based form of cooperation would also have revealed clearly the class, rather than individual, character of the landlord-moneylender- bureaucrat alliances. But the government proclaimed that they were developing *panchayats* [three-tier rural self-government bodies, at the level of village, block and district] for people's power. Unless *panchayats* are related closely with mass organisations of toiling people, these would necessarily be dependent on the bureaucratic system. And that is what happened.

Despite much talk about *panchayats* being organs of self-rule of peasants, rich peasants and teachers formed the bulk. And given the fact that the poorer classes seldom were able to let their children finish secondary education, let alone college, teachers came from rich peasant families, or from non-agricultural families. A survey in one of the districts, Purulia, further showed that real help was received from the government's developmental projects by a significant part of the rural rich, using their positions in the *panchayats*. (6)

The key issue of land distribution, in fact, tells an interesting story. In 1967, and again in 1969, two short-lived United Front governments had been formed. There had been a mass upsurge, and huge land seizures and distribution. OF ALL the ceiling-surplus land vested with the state since 1953 (when the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act was passed) and the year 2000, as much as 44 per cent of this land (6 lakh acres) was obtained in the five-year period between 1967 and 1972, thanks to the energetic initiatives of the two United Fronts; another 26% (3.5 lakh acres) had been acquired earlier. In the last 20 years of Left Front rule only 1.53 lakh acres were acquired, which amounts to almost a quarter of what was achieved during the very short UF regime and almost a half of what was obtained during the 14 years (1953-1967) of Congress rule.

The Operation Barga, a scheme for registering all share-croppers to halt their eviction, has been given much prominence. But in fact, it was a failure. The National Sample Survey data pointed out that only 30.6% of all bargadars were registered and that there was a distinct class bias, too: of the landless tenants, only 16% were recorded, whereas in the case of big tenants [renting land from poor peasants under profitable terms] the corresponding figure was as high as 71%!

Turning to more recent times, we find a pamphlet, issued by the National Book Agency, the CPI(M)'s Calcutta based publishing house, entitled *Aajker Bisayyan Bharat O Paschimbanga* (Contemporary Globalisation, India and West Bengal). Nirupam Sen, a leading member of the West Bengal state committee and a minister in the state government, spoke about globalisation and West Bengal. Here is what he had to say on agriculture:

"For twenty-five years we have been running the left Front government in India....You all know that we never entertained such an oxymoronic hope that we will establish socialism in the provinces, like West Bengal, Kerala or Tripura, while the rest of India will go along the capitalist path." In other words, "we" have also been simply serving capitalism. But he then bravely asserted that the Left regime would never abolish laws imposing land-holding ceilings. (7) These brave words were followed by a very different reality. The West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 has come out a short while back. Though an official publication, the person in charge was a reputable leftist economist, Jayati Ghosh of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, one of five left-wing economists who had threatened to resign from the Planning Commission unless World Bank linked advisers were removed from the Commission. So the report can be taken as a serious work by a pro-CPI(M) scholar. This report tells us that those small peasants who had received land, those sharecroppers who had been registered to give them permanent, secure tenure, are increasingly leaving the land

instead of cultivating it.

The report hedges its bets, but the reasons are clear. Production cost is steadily going up since high yielding seed, chemical fertilisers and chemical pesticides, groundwater, pumps, diesel, electricity, cost of all these things are going up. The option of high yielding variety production means that each year, to merely produce as much as in the previous year, greater fertiliser, pesticide, or more expensive fertiliser, more water etc are needed. Secondly, prices are not rising as fast. Peasants are compelled to take loans to produce, and sell the moment the crop is harvested, hence at a low rate. Institutional loans are drying up as the peasants fail to repay old loans, with the result that they are returning to money lenders, whom the left Front had promised to eradicate.

The report is not untruthful, but it soft pedals these, and says that the small peasants are voluntarily leaving the land. One could as well say that the farmers in Andhra who in their hundreds have consumed pesticide or set themselves on fire have voluntarily chosen to leave for their heavenly abode. Peasants do not voluntarily leave the land. But the terms of production are steadily swinging against them. Already, farmers movements in parts of India are discussing not only subsidies and the need to write off loans, but alternative agriculture, organic farming, complementary farming, alternative technology, and so on. But in West Bengal, a technology-happy left believes that alternative means cash crops, export oriented crops, nuts of various kind, sunflower, and so on. To understand and spread such alternatives they are inviting imperialist advisers.

Industry and the Working Class

In 1977, the Left Front government issued an industrial policy declaration. In government declarations and in the utterances of the then Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, there was a claim that this economic policy was significantly different from policies prevailing in other provinces. (8) Declared policies stated that in this province the power of multinational capital would be loosened. But the Chief Minister went on repeated junkets abroad, seeking investment in West Bengal from the imperialist countries. The West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation provided loans under the 'State Incentive Scheme' to a number of multinational corporations. Within the first seven years, new joint sector agreements were made with Kamaya Electric Company, Japan; General Cables, USA; Dunlop Limited, UK; Societe Chimique de Carbonnaisse, and others. (9) In 1983, the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation added two new members in its Board of Directors - G. P. Goenka, President of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, and T.V. Sinha, President of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. Joint sector agreements with Indian big business also proceeded further (10).

The other side of this, rather insipidly flat industrial policy of a bourgeois provincial government that sounds surprising only because of the radical rhetoric presented as a preamble, is the policy to the working class. Within weeks of the Left Front winning the provincial election, the slogan was, "under the changed circumstances...". The gap would be filled up depending upon the sector being approached. For the workers it was, under the changed circumstances strikes are the last weapons of the working class, and should be used sparingly. A CPI(M) leader who would later serve a term as a member of parliament, and who is now editor of the party's 'cultural' magazine, Professor Biplab Dasgupta, wrote an article in the Bengali theoretical organ of the party. He asserted that though this government was the consequence of long struggles by workers and peasants it was not a working class government, because state power lay not with the provincial government but the central government led by the Congress, representing monopoly capital and landlords. Yet, the character of struggles must change, "strikes for the sake of strikes are useless, particularly when the Left Front is in power in the state [i.e., province]." (11)

There was a police firing on agitating dockworkers before a year was out, and one worker was killed. From 1978-9, power plant workers at Santaldih were agitating under the leadership of non-CPI(M) unions. They were promptly branded 'Naxalite' [Indian term for Maoist]. There were repeated arrests of such workers.

Turning to the present continuous, we find the same administration of bourgeois government, with the additional result that globalisation has to be addressed. Here we again have Nirupam Sen, stating clearly: "Then who will build industries? They are saying, only private entrepreneurs can build industries. Then we have to build industries in our province by catching hold of private capital. We cannot, after all, say that there should be no industry in West Bengal..... The capitalists have said we will decide in which province we will set up industries. They will do so according to whichever state gives them greater benefits. They have said this correctly. After all, we cannot tell them, you are generous, look at the misery of people of West Bengal, please be kind to boys and girls here in West Bengal, please set up industries on humanitarian grounds. This does not happen in the economic field. They are coming for profits, they will establish industries if they can make profits, where there is greater profit that is where industries will grow." (12) As Bill Clinton said, 'it's the economy, stupid'.

The CPI(M)-led left Front had been very vocal in criticising the NDA for its pro-privatisation, anti-labour policies. But their track record in West Bengal is singularly questionable. To start with, we can look at utilities. The city of Calcutta gets its electricity from a private utility, the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation. In February 2001, the West Bengal government issued an order allowing the CESC to liquidate its dues to the West Bengal State Electricity Board in instalments by March 2006 without payment of interest (Rs. 750.2 millions @ approximately Rs 46 per US\$), and waived Rs 124.1 million payable against annual minimum charged for 1999-2000. The Government also agreed to waive 60 % of the Late Payment Surcharge dues, amounting to Rs. 1097.2 million. This same West Bengal government repeatedly asserts that because it is cash-strapped, it cannot pay salaries to all those to whom it is committed, at the proper time and rate. Thus, Dearness Allowance which is paid by the Central Government is 14% higher than that paid by the West Bengal Government. Salaries of most school and college teachers is paid by the government. At the same time tax rebates are given to big business.

Tea plantations, one of the oldest working class sectors in West Bengal, show an abysmal picture. Data on wages, land, labour productivity and prices in selected states (13) reveals that though labour productivity is among the highest in West Bengal, wages are lowest. As of early 2004, there were 25 tea gardens closed or abandoned by the owner. According to a survey of 2003, after the closure of any tea garden, within a short period ration supply for the workers was halted, the electricity connection was cut off because the bills were not being met, and even water supply was cut off. Deaths of workers in plantations follow a set pattern. Blood dysentery, cardio-respiratory failure, and acute anaemia followed by gastric ulcer and hepatitis were the major causes of death. With the government not bothering to monitor payments, planters, along with jute mill owners, have also been regularly defalcating workers' salaries, notably the retirement benefit components (provident fund contribution, non-payment of gratuity etc). K.L. Mahendra, General Secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress, and Gurudas Dasgupta, West Bengal State Secretary of the same organisation, told the press at a news conference in 2001, "Bengal heads the provident fund defaulters' list. 'In Bengal the total amount of default is more than Rs. 70 crore.'" They named the jute industry as the biggest defaulter, followed by central public sector undertakings. (14)

In every industry, workers have two options as "globalisation" becomes the plea to further reduce wages, steal benefits, or simply shut down the concerns so that they can be relocated, or even reopened under a new name. They can die of malnutrition and illness, or commit suicide in one of two ways - directly, e.g., by consuming poison or indirectly by agitating, when the police will come and

fire at them. When the former owners of the Chandmoni Tea Estate tried to turn a part of the estate into a satellite township, in agreement with the government, workers protested. As a result, one worker died in the police firing. (15) Nearly 1500 workers were suffering as a consequence of the long closure of the Baranagar Jute Mill, and one of them killed himself.(16) These two examples will have to stand in for numerous examples on both sides. We would not dream of singling out the West Bengal government. All we wish to underscore is the fact that there is nothing different in West Bengal.

Globalisation, Privatisation, Resistance(!)

In purely social sectors, like education and healthcare, the commercialisation under World Bank and WTO pressure is evident. The World Bank, which was funding a Rs. 7010 million health services development project in West Bengal, withheld its mid-term evaluation report in 1999 as it was not confident about the government's commitment. The government promptly complied, by shifting to a contractual hiring policy in place of recruitment into the state Health Services. The Chief Minister, Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, stated that the same policy would be applied for teachers as well. (17) Concerning health care, of course, the most eloquent figures are these:

Population of West Bengal in 1971: 44.3 million

Population of West Bengal in 2001: 80.2 million

Private nursing homes in Calcutta in 1977 (the year the LF came to power): 350+

Private nursing homes in Calcutta in 2003: 2000+

As a spokesperson for the nursing home owners' association said: "business was good and looked like staying so". (18)

Gender and Human Rights

Left Front rule has also shown that here human rights are systematically violated, women are as systematically oppressed, as in rule by the non-left. On 5th July 2002, a number of people were arrested, not because they were suspected of specific crimes, but because they were suspected of being associated with the CPI(ML) peoples' War, a group that is, however, not an illegal group in West Bengal. One such arrested person, named Abhijit Sinha, was so deeply traumatised by the interrogation, that though released from police custody, he threw himself under a running train to commit suicide. (19) Over 3500 people were arrested during this drive, on charges such as waging war against the state, murder, the Arms Act, etc. Women like Behula Kalindi, Sulochana Kalindi etc were forced to undergo a "sex-determination" test consisting of their being stripped in front of the Superintendent of Police. Bablu Das of the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, too was arrested.

In recent months, the fight against the CPI(ML) PW has taken the Left Front to the right of the Congress. The recently elected Congress government of Andhra Pradesh has initiated political discussions with the PWG, seeking to co-opt it within the system, while the CPI(M) opposes such dialogues. Even more fantastic was the statement of CPI(M) leader Benoy Konar, defending police brutality. "It must be viewed whether police is carrying out torture with a correct aim or an incorrect aim...In a class divided society, the police has the duty of carrying out repression.... You [journalists] have the pen in your hands, the police has the stick." (20)

As for gender rights, this is particularly terrifying. Rulers of West Bengal have asserted that women are more secure in West Bengal. Just a few pieces of information from the last 27 years challenge this argument and put into question how far they practise any kind of rights discourse geared to the toiling people.

In the previous, Congress regime, Archana Guha had been arrested simply because her brother had been a Maoist. In police custody, she had been tortured brutally, resulting in her becoming a cripple. In 1977, after being released, she filed several cases. In all but one, she lost. And even that case was won after two decades, in 1996. The case was against a powerful police officer, Runu Guha Neogi. The only rights organisations standing by her throughout this period were the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha (Forum Against Oppression of Women), Ahalya, and Pragatisheel Mahila Samity (Progressive Women's Organisation). The CPI(M)-led Democratic Women's Association took the stance that this was a private case. The case was prolonged because the state government provided ample help to the guilty police officer.

In 1984, newspapers reported the case of Maya Barui. Maya had been raped. Due to lack of evidence the accused were acquitted. But Maya was kept in judicial custody for four years on the plea that she needed security. When a young lawyer named Shibshanker Chakrabarty learnt this, he filed a case in court. It then came out that there were 78 other women similarly imprisoned. The Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha and other organisations called a people's convention over this issue. The CPI(M) representative invited to the meeting said that it would be wrong to view the freedom of these women from a civil liberties perspective, and warned that if released they might turn to prostitution! (21)

In recent years, there has been a systematic development of politically motivated rapes. We cannot deal with this in detail here, except to point out that CPI(M) leaders, like Anil Biswas, the State Secretary, have repeatedly responded to rape cases by claiming that the moral character of the victim was bad. (22)

The Meaning of the Left Front Support to the UPA:

We have sought to show that for two and a half decades, a process of change has been going on within the left front. As a result, today its major partner, the CPI(M), has moved from Stalinism via Social Democracy to Social Liberalism. Just as the human body retains certain vestigial organs, so does the CPI(M). In government, it has a strongly nomenklatura type policy in key jobs. But this is not enough to continue to characterise the CPI(M) as Stalinist, even if it does carry quotations from Stalin in its daily organ. It is rather a party of Stalinist origin that has moved to a rightwing Social Democratic/Social Liberal position, and is seeking to assure the Indian as well as international bourgeoisie that subject to certain vote-bank constraints, it is willing to adjust with them.

The CPI(M) gets a large chunk of its votes from white collar and organised blue collar workers, so it has to press for some of their demands. But this is done entirely within bourgeois, and even neoliberal framework. But it is not willing to fight in a class struggle manner. Nothing proves this better than the fact that the Union Budget 2004-5 was passed by parliament with full CPI(M) support. This budget was based on the following basic issues:

- The government must be downsized (i.e., jobs must be cut and government role in social sectors must be reduced)
- Subsidies must be cut (not that subsidies to the rich, in the form of tax sops, will be reduced, but price of food grain will go up, price of fuel oil will go up, cost of healthcare and education will go up, etc, for all but a very small layer of those defined as being Below the Poverty Line)

- Interest must be paid (to all foreign creditors, above all) on time
- Budgetary as well as overall deficit must be reduced (without cutting back on interest or principal repayment)

The priorities, as described by Finance Minister Chidambaram, included further simplifying the tax regime (knocking out rebates available mostly to middle income groups), paying interests and cutting subsidies. This adds up to a sharp transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. And the CPI(M) voted for it in the name of fighting fascism and therefore keeping the UPA in power for five years. As the *New York Times* said, "Do not worry about what the Left says, watch what they actually do." What they will do is clear - at the state level, in those states where they are a major force, they will fight against the Congress simply as two parties do within any bourgeois democratic framework. At the all-India level, in the name of anti-fascism they will support the Congress. And in terms of global politics, they will blow hot and cold, screech about the ill effects of globalisation, but then put out feelers for World Bank aid, and carry out World Bank, IMF, WTO prescriptions.

Footnotes

(1) The Communist Party of India was founded in 1920 by a small group abroad, and by a relatively larger group in India in 1925. After a massive police raid and the marathon Meerut Conspiracy Case trial, the party virtually broke up at the end of the 1920s. When it was painfully rebuilt, the Comintern had come under full Stalinist control. After independence, the party adopted an ultraleft line which was ended after Moscow changed line. But factions continued, with the supporters of "national democracy" calling for an alliance with the Congress-led wing of the bourgeoisie and the supporters of "people's democracy" calling for an alliance with anti-Congress bourgeois parties. There also emerged an authentic left wing, but very Maoist and very hostile, from an ultra-Stalinist viewpoint, to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. The India-China border war of 1962 exacerbated tensions, and in 1964 the party split formally. The supporters of "people's democracy" and the Maoists combined to form the CPI(Marxist). But when, during the elections of 1967, the CPI(M) formed electoral alliances, the Maoists, with some prodding from China, started a split operation, which culminated in the formation of the CPI(ML) and other groups in 1969. Formally the CPI with its looser membership criteria had a larger membership, and it had a better all-India spread. But the CPI(M) became the most powerful left party in three provinces - West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. Its trade union, the CITU, became the largest of the left trade union federations. When in 1975, the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared an "emergency" and set up an authoritarian regime, the CPI supported her in the name of fighting communal fascism. After 1977, they changed this line, but as a result, became dependent on the CPI(M) to restore their lost credibility.

The Revolutionary Socialist Party was formed in 1938-40, mostly by former revolutionary nationalists who had become Marxists, but were critical of the Stalinist Communist International. At that time there was a Trotskyist component. By the 1960s it had become a centrist party moving right. It has participated, along with the CPI(M), in a provincial government for 27 years in West Bengal.

The Forward Bloc is a petty bourgeois left party founded by the well-known freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose. In the 1940s it was strongly anti-CPI, since the CPI had called Bose a Quisling (like many anti-colonial nationalists, he had sought Axis help in waging war against the British rulers of India). From the 1960s, it would be in alliance with one or the other CP. It has also been part of the ruling left front in West Bengal.

(2) Venkatesh Athreya, 'A Step forward', *Frontline*, June 18, 2004, pp. 12-16.

(3) In early 2002 there was a planned mass killing of Muslims, mass destruction of muslim-owned

property, mass rape of Muslim women, and forcible ouster of many from their villages or urban settlements. For discussions on these issues, as well as the background, see Kunal Chattopadhyay ed., *The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism*, Baroda, 2002. For the gender dimensions see S. Marik and M. Chatterjee - *Garbhaghathi Gujarat*, PBS, Calcutta, 2002. For an English text, see S. Marik, 'Women's Bodies as Sites of Communal Contestation - Gujarat 2002', paper presented at the Institute for European and International Studies, Luxembourg, 28 October.

(4) The model is very old. The Bombay Industrial Relations Act, pushed through by a provincial Congress government, made it possible to recognise an unrepresentative Congress-led trade union in the textile industry, and to derecognise the union affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress, then led by the undivided CPI. Since then, every general strike in the textile industry in Bombay has been an "illegal" strike, led by 'unrecognised' unions.

(5) Prabhat Patnaik, *India: A Setback for Neo-Liberalism*, 10 June, 2004, www.macrosan.com

(6) Prabir Bhattacharyya, ed, *Anva Artha 19: Bamfront Sarkar-Ekti Mulyayan*, Calcutta, May 1985, pp.11-14.

(7) Amiyo Kumar Bagchi, Nirupam Sen and Prakash Karat, *Aajker Bisayyan, Bharat O Pachim Banga*, NBA Pvt Ltd, Calcutta, 2002, pp.24, 29.

(8) See Common Minimum Programme of the Left Front for West Bengal Assembly Election, 1977 p8, 'Industrial Policy for West Bengal', *Social Scientist*, Nr. 66-67 Jan-Feb., 1978-79; and Jyoti Basu, cited in *Anva Artha*, p.27.

(9) This is based on reports from Business Standard for mainly the two years 1983 and 1984, and therefore a very incomplete and selective list.

(10) WBIDC, *Annual Report and Accounts*, 1982-83.

(11) Biplab Dasgupta, 'Marxbad O Sramiksreni', *Marxbadi Path*, vol.3, no. 4, pp.18, 19.

(12) Amiyo Kumar Bagchi, Nirupam Sen and Prakash Karat, *Aajker Bisayyan, Bharat O Pachim Banga*, p.25

(13) Centre for Education and Communication, *Tea Plantations of West Bengal in Crisis*, New Delhi, 2003.

(14) *The Telegraph*, 25.8.2001

(15) *The Telegraph*, 27.6.2002

(16) *The Telegraph*, 21.4.2001

(17) *The Telegraph*, 14.7.1999 and 23.2.2001.

(18) *The Telegraph*, 28.10.2003

(19) *Ananda Bazar patrika*, 9.7.2002.

(20) *Aajkaal*, [Bengali daily from Calcutta, pro-left] 13.7.02.

(21) For a detailed discussion of violation of the rights of women in West Bengal see Maitreyee Chatterjee, 'Marudyane Phanimonsha', in *Chaturtha Antarjatik*, April 2004.

(22) For a detailed treatment see Soma Marik, 'Massive Sexual Violence on Women and the Collapse of Left Pretensions'.