

# Indian Elections - Verdict 2009 and the Left: Key Issues and the Road Ahead

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Five years ago, the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha had witnessed the largest ever presence of Left parliamentarians. Along with the defeat of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the arrival of the Left as a major player in national politics was a key message of the 2004 elections. Five years later, the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha now presents a drastically different picture. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] and the CPI, the two biggest constituents of the Left bloc in Parliament, have secured their lowest ever tallies, reducing the overall Left presence to a meagre 24.

On the face of it, this outcome appears quite baffling and out of sync with contemporary global reality. Global capitalism is passing through one of its roughest patches and in many parts of the world we can see a renewed assertion of the working people and a consequent tilt towards the Left. For quite some time India too has been in the grip of a protracted agrarian crisis aggravated by the onslaught of neoliberal policies, and now, thanks to increasing globalisation, more and more sectors of the Indian economy are feeling the heat of the global capitalist meltdown. Millions of toiling Indians are faced with the threat of outright pauperisation and ever shrinking means of livelihood.

On top of it, there has been this pronounced pro-US policy shift pushing India into a strategic alliance with the US and consequently rendering India much more vulnerable to both terror threats as well as greater American intervention in domestic affairs.

Such a context should have proved conducive to further growth of the Left, especially when the CPI (M) and its partners had already acquired a firm foothold in the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. But the results of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections tell a totally different story. Where and how did the CPI (M) lose the plot? There is a growing debate in Left circles on this question, and as the crisis of the CPI (M) deepens, the debate should also get deeper and sharper.

How does the CPI (M) look at its electoral debacle? The communiqué issued after the CPI (M) central committee (CC) meeting in Delhi on June 20-21 describes the outcome as “serious reverses” amounting to an “electoral setback”. It acknowledged “political, governmental and organisational reasons for the setbacks suffered” in West Bengal including “shortcomings in the functioning of government, panchayats and municipalities based on a proper class outlook”, “failure of the government to implement properly various measures directly concerning the lives of the people” and “alienation amongst some sections of the peasantry”. According to the communiqué, the CPI (M) CC also felt it was a mistake to extend the call for building a third alternative to the formation of an alternative government. The CC admitted that “In the absence of a countrywide alliance and no common policy platform being presented, the call for an alternative government was unrealistic.”

This CC review of course comes in the wake of a whole range of public statements already made by several CPI (M) leaders pointing accusing fingers in different directions. Kerala Chief Minister and veteran politburo (PB) member VS Achuthanandan has ruled out any ‘anti-incumbency’ factor against his government, thus indicating that the problems lie at the doorsteps of the party. Several West Bengal leaders hold the “third front” experiment responsible while some have started blaming the decision to withdraw support to the Congress. Two days before the last leg of the Lok Sabha (LS)

election, a Bengali TV channel broadcast an exclusive interview with veteran West Bengal minister Subhas Chakraborty where he openly questioned the party's choice of third front allies and described the Congress as an indispensable partner not only for the defence of secularism but also in any fight against imperialism! Only a handful of West Bengal leaders, most notably Land and Land Reforms Minister Abdur Rezzak Mollah, have dared mention the Left Front government's forcible land acquisition drive as the main factor.

Addressing the press after the CC meeting Prakash Karat talked of "near unanimity" in the CC over the party's act of withdrawal of support to UPA government on the issue of Indo-US nuclear deal, thereby indirectly acknowledging differences within the CC over the subject. The review which expresses the majority opinion does mention some of the key problems associated with the party and governments in West Bengal and Kerala as well as with the implementation of the party's all-India tactical line. But these problems and mistakes are symptomatic of a deeper malady rooted in the party's understanding and practice of dealing with governments whether in the state or at the Centre. The obsession with somehow retaining or acquiring power has been pushing the party deeper into the quagmire of right opportunism and in the same proportion the party has been moving away from the basic masses and their interests and struggles. The erosion in the CPI (M)'s votes is only a belated electoral reflection of this growing disjunction between the party and the people, between governance and struggle. The CC review of course scrupulously shies away from any inquiry into the root causes.

As far as West Bengal is concerned, the results indicate nothing short of a massive anti-CPI (M) electoral explosion and this can no longer be attributed to any one single factor. Singur and Nandigram have definitely been big issues but we need to understand why Singur and Nandigram happened in the first place. There is something fundamentally wrong with the notion of governance and industrialisation that believes that a modest Tata plant could be showcased as a Left-ruled state's biggest achievement in 'industrialisation', and then pulls out all stops to appease the 'investor' and crush every protest of the land-losing peasants and livelihood-losing sharecroppers and labourers. After Singur, many had expected the CPI (M) to learn its lessons, but Nandigram showed that the Left rulers had lost the very will or ability to learn any positive lesson. One really had to see the CPI (M)'s election campaign in West Bengal to have a sense of its world of political make-believe. While Mamata Banerjee's campaign endlessly invoked the now famous trinity of "Ma-Mati-Manush", giving a highly emotive human form to the agenda of land, livelihood and liberty, the CPI (M) campaign revolved primarily around Nano, the promised lakhtakia (Rs. one lakh) Tata car! The CPI (M) believed it could win the elections by holding Mamata Banerjee responsible for the Tata's decision to relocate the Nano plant in Gujarat and projecting her as a demon who killed Bengal's dream of industrialisation and employment generation!

The spectacular past electoral successes of the CPI (M) in West Bengal were rooted primarily in a broad class alliance that carried the rural poor along with the middle classes, erstwhile landed gentry and the neo-rich sections. Having consolidated the rural poor base through a combination of much touted rural reforms (Operation Barga, land redistribution and panchayati raj, to name the three most well-known measures), the CPI (M) thought it could switch over to the usual trajectory of the 'trickle-down pattern of development'. The class contradictions and popular grievances that are handled in other states largely within the matrix of competitive bourgeois politics were sought to be contained with measured doses of coercion and patronage as the party retained its overall grip over the broad social coalition. But with the rise and consolidation of a narrow nexus of corrupt officials, leaders and middlemen and steady reversal of much of the earlier gains won by the rural poor, the coalition had already started cracking and Singur and Nandigram widened the cracks and opened the floodgates for popular resentment and resistance.

The CPI (M) has suffered an equally severe setback in Kerala too. Unlike in West Bengal, the CPI

(M)'s domination in Kerala has never been unchallenged and the party here has always had to operate within a highly competitive environment. Yet the intensity of the rout suffered by the CPI (M) in the 2009 elections indicates a deeper structural erosion in the party's support beyond the alternating cyclical swings one expects in Kerala. The CPI (M) in Kerala remains mired in factionalism, the spirit of commerce dominates the official culture of the party and now we have this shocking case of major corruption allegations and CBI enquiry against the party's state secretary. Alienation of landless dalit labourers has also assumed serious proportions in Kerala.

The poll debacle of the CPI (M) must also be analysed in the context of the party's all-India tactical line. With a sixty-plus-strong contingent of parliamentarians at its command, in 2004 the CPI (M) had come to acquire a greatly increased visibility and say in national politics. Even after cobbling a post-poll alliance, in 2004 the Congress had to rely on the CPI (M)'s support to form government. While not joining the UPA government, the CPI (M) utilised this juncture to enter into a programmatic alliance with the Congress, limiting dissent against Congress policies to talks within the framework of UPA-Left coordination committee. Even on the one issue of Indo-US nuclear deal, the opposition came too late and encumbered in lot of technicalities and devoid of any attempt to build any significant mass resistance.

The CPI (M) now claims credit for 'pressurising' the Congress to legislate National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and waive farm loans. These claims would have sounded somewhat convincing had the CPI (M) ever unleashed any major mass political initiative on the issues of rural unemployment or farmers' suicides, or for that matter, if West Bengal could top the list of states in terms of implementation of NREGA. Ironically, while the Congress derived considerable political mileage from measures like NREGA and farm loan waiver, the CPI (M) exposed itself as the most brutal defender of corporate landgrab. Indeed, the failure of the Left to oppose the SEZ Act 2005 in Parliament and the wholesale adoption and implementation of neoliberal economic policies by the West Bengal government seriously dented the CPI (M)'s oppositional claims on the economic policy front.

After the eventual withdrawal of support, instead of going to the masses the CPI (M) leadership got busy with desperate attempts to seek dubious allies. On the eve of the elections, the CPI (M) formed a programme-free "third front" with motley regional forces ranging from the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) to the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and projected it as the core of the next government. The CPI (M) now admits that the "third front" did not fit the bill of a credible and viable national alternative, yet Prakash Karat would like us to believe that it served two important purposes.

His first claim is that the third front denied the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) the luxury of finding any ally in the southern states and thus prevented the NDA from emerging as a national alternative. Well, if the AIADMK or TDP did not choose to ally with the BJP, it was because they did not expect to gain anything by entering into a pre-poll alliance with the BJP which has little presence in the southern states except Karnataka. Likewise, the BJD's decision to dump the BJP just on the eve of the elections was also prompted by the BJD's own electoral calculations and had nothing to do with the CPI(M)'s "third front" initiative. In the event of a hung parliament if the BJP-led NDA had any realistic chance of forming government, these parties would have had no problem in jumping on to the NDA bandwagon. Did not we all see how the TRS switched sides in anticipation of an NDA victory?

Karat's second argument deals with the combined vote share of the "third front" parties and the BSP, a respectable 21 per cent. According to him, "this shows the potential for building up a third alternative ... which is not merely an electoral alliance but a coming together of the parties and forces on a common platform through movements and struggles for alternative policies distinct from

that of the Congress and the BJP.” If the combined vote share of the BJD and the BSP, and the AIADMK and the TDP shows the potential for a movement-based third front committed to “alternative policies distinct from that of the Congress and the BJP”, what prevented the CPI (M) from actualising that alliance? Karat’s answer is simple and smart: since electoral combinations were forged statewise, it “precluded any national policy platform from being projected.” But if all these parties are committed to alternative policies why could not they agree to a common policy platform? And if it was indeed so difficult on the national level what stopped the alternative policies from being projected in the respective states?

While Karat valorises the whole range of non-Congress non-BJP parties as prospective anti-corporate anti-imperialist partners, many of his comrades would love to return to the safety of a strategic understanding with the good old Congress. Both Karat and his detractors who find him ‘dogmatic’ and ‘adventurist’ actually reduce the question of revival and independence of the Left to the choice of allies and forging of convenient electoral combinations. Instead of sticking to a set pattern of alliance, Karat would prefer to swap allies and we have already seen this line in action in Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Orissa and Assam. Dumping the DMK the CPI(M) has now chosen the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu; in Andhra electoral understanding with the Congress has given way to mahakutumi (grand alliance) with TDP and even TRS (the TDP has all along been opposed to the idea of a separate Telangana and so has been the CPI (M), yet they had no problem in forging a grand alliance with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) whose sole agenda is the formation of a separate Telangana state); in Orissa the CPI (M) has tied up with the ruling BJD and in Assam it wanted to have a seat sharing pact with the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF).

On paper, the combinations looked pretty formidable, but on the ground the results have been quite dismal. The alliance arithmetic has yielded only two seats to the CPI (M) – one LS seat in Tamil Nadu and one Assembly seat in Andhra. In Orissa and Assam, the CPI (M) has not only failed to win any seat but it has also suffered a major erosion in terms of votes. The loss must not of course be assessed only in terms of seats and votes, the credibility of the party and the morale of the party’s support base are far more important parameters. What did the CPI (M) expect to gain by glorifying and allying with Naveen Patnaik in Orissa? While Kandhamal happened, Naveen Patnaik’s government did nothing to stop the anti-Christian violence. On the eve of the elections, Naveen Patnaik dumped the BJP and the CPI and the CPI (M) rushed to glorify him as a new-found secular hero, enabling him to reduce the Orissa elections to a contrived showdown between the two estranged partners – the BJD and the BJP. The issues of displacement and deprivation of the tribal and other toiling masses were conveniently brushed aside. Will the CPI (M) ever be able to stand up in Orissa by glorifying Naveen Patnaik? (The story of the CPI’s victory from the Jagatsinghpur LS constituency that includes the site of the ongoing popular struggle against the land acquisition plans of the South Korean steel major Posco is no less shocking – while the local CPI leaders spearheading the anti-Posco movement languish in jail, a Congress leader opposed to the movement joined the CPI and won on the party’s ticket with the blessings of Posco and Naveen Patnaik!)

Basing on its stable bases in West Bengal and Kerala, the CPI (M) has over the years evolved a political line and praxis in which the oppositional role of the party is thoroughly subordinated to the agenda of power-sharing at the central level. The party programme too has been suitably ‘updated’ to provide for this scheme of things. In 1977 when the CPI (M) first came to power, it projected the Left Front government as a weapon of struggle. But now in the party’s perception state governments have been delinked from any idea of struggle and are seen exclusively as instruments of ‘development’ and ‘governance’ and, in the national context, as stepping stones towards power-sharing at the Centre. The CPI (M) now fights elections only with the slogan of government formation no matter whether the party is in a position to form one or not. The concept of a committed and vigorous Left opposition has virtually become alien to the CPI (M)’s entire tactical

framework and political praxis.

While the CPI (M) has theoretically and practically 'upgraded' itself as a party of power, ironically the 2009 elections have pushed it closer to the oppositional slot. Nationally it has no other choice but to sit in the opposition and if the present trend continues, the CPI(M) will soon also have to reinvent itself as an opposition party in West Bengal too.

The other big question that confronts the CPI (M) is the issue of its attitude to people's struggle and the democratic intelligentsia. While the CPI (M) has developed considerable expertise and experience in forging fronts with disparate forces and brokering peace among sparring bourgeois parties, it exhibits a near-pathological inability to deal with popular movements and people's outbursts. To take a few examples, we can recall the CPI (M)'s response to the Naxalbari movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s in West Bengal, the 1974 youth movement in Bihar, the Assam movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Gorkhaland agitation in the 1980s which resurfaced again in the recent past and most recently the Singur-Nandigram movement in West Bengal. It has been a habit of the CPI (M) to dismiss every such popular movement as a conspiracy and side with the state in crushing these movements. And now in Lalgarh, the Congress has once again trapped the CPI (M) into discharging its repressive 'responsibility'.

In the 1970s the Congress had usurped powers in West Bengal through highly dubious means and gone on to unleash systematic state terror on all sections of the Left. Even though the CPI (M) could not put up any significant resistance to the Congress-led reign of terror, and the CPI (ML) had already suffered a massive setback, the overwhelming public mood in West Bengal remained very much against the Congress. The semi-fascist terror in West Bengal soon gave way to a countrywide reign of Emergency that was overthrown by the people through the historic mandate of 1977. The CPI (M)'s ascent to power in West Bengal was an integral part of that larger democratic upsurge. But today, West Bengal is witnessing a reverse phenomenon when the CPI (M) is being rejected not only by large sections of the democratic opinion but also a significant section of its own base.

Prakash Karat is right when he says that the CPI(M) has in the past overcome many difficult periods, but the present juncture poses a different kind of challenge when the party is fast losing ground in what used to be its most stable and powerful stronghold. Karat is again right when he says that "anti-Communist quarters who have been rejoicing at the setbacks suffered by the Left ... will be proved wrong." But the point is not just to counter anti-Communist canards and wild dreams, but more importantly to address the questions that have emerged from within the CPI (M)'s own base and the larger Left and democratic circles that once provided such tremendous support to the party.

It is quite clear that the ruling classes see the poll outcome as a handle to malign and marginalise the Left. As mentioned in the CPI (ML) CC communiqué of 27 May, "Armed with a security doctrine that identifies Maoism/Naxalism/Left extremism as the biggest threat to internal security and an electoral outcome which has handed out the worst ever electoral drubbing to the parliamentary left, the ruling classes are now all set to launch a comprehensive assault on the Left as a whole." The Left can thwart this design only by mounting a powerful counter-offensive. Reclaiming the Left role as a consistently secular, democratic and anti-imperialist opposition and reasserting the Left identity as the most committed and trusted champion of people's interests and struggles is the need of the hour.

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