

# What is the Left to do in India?

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The Left has suffered a huge defeat in the 2009 national election in India. Its electoral strength at the national level (in terms of the number of Members of the Parliament who are directly elected) has been reduced by more than half. How the current economic crisis plays itself out, and with what implications for workers and peasants in India, will in good part depend on how the crisis of the Indian Left is resolved. A few preliminary thoughts are offered here about this defeat, which may have some wider relevance for the Left in other parts of the world.

The electoral defeat of the Indian Left (gathering parties like the CPI-M, CPI and others under the Left Front grouping) is unfortunate, if not unexpected. But history has provided the Left with an opportunity for rethinking its political strategy. It is true that the success or failure of Left forces cannot and should not be judged (solely or even mainly) by its electoral performance. If the electoral loss was the only form of loss, it would not be a cause of much concern. But the electoral loss experienced by the Left is also indicative of the fact that most segments of the Left which are participating in elections have more or less distanced themselves from radical mass movements of the marginalized, and especially rural and urban workers, poor peasants and petty entrepreneurs/traders, at local, regional and other scales. The Left forces who fight in elections spend most of their limited political energy on elections per se or matters directly related to elections. To the extent that it is important for them to fight in elections, electoral fights must be rooted in, and grow out of, their participation in, and leadership of, class-based democratic movements. Elections must be used for ideological and mobilizational purposes – for educating masses and sections of the (urban) middle class about the failure of the ruling classes and their governments and about the potential for radical change.

## CONTRADICTIONS OF THE LEFT

It is time for the Left to become self-conscious of its contradictions.

These contradictions emanate from, and reflect, the fact that the Left's ideology and practice are one thing at the centre of the Indian state in Delhi and another in the states. There are two points to be made here.

Firstly, supporting one bourgeois political formation after another (Janata coalition, Congress coalition, etc.) at the national level allows these formations, and especially Congress, the traditional party of the bourgeoisie and landlords, to implement blatantly right-wing neoliberal policies with a so-called human face.

The fact that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a former economics professor who belongs to the Congress, and others constantly refer to reforms with human face mean that the so-called reforms are essentially inhuman and must be seen as such. By supporting a certain type of national government in order to keep a nationalist and religious fundamentalist party (BJP) at bay, the Left is partly seen as responsible for these inhuman policies. On the other hand, to the extent that the Left puts pressure on the national government to implement a few pro-poor policies such as the employment guarantee scheme in rural areas, it is the parties running the government and especially the Congress that take the credit for these policies. As a result, these parties get votes from the poor in exchange for a few crumbs thrown at them. So, the Left does not get credit for the good thing it does (i.e. pro-poor policies it forces the national government to implement; some kind of government regulation over the financial sector which has allowed the nation to avert the worst consequences of the economic crisis so far). It is indeed bound to be (rightly) discredited (among workers and peasants) for the bad thing it is seen as responsible for (i.e. supporting a government which is basically for neoliberalism and thus providing much-needed legitimacy to the bourgeoisie and its government).

It is also discredited in another sense, and this time rather wrongly. Thanks to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology, development is construed as market-led development. Given that development is the mantra for winning elections, and to the extent that the Left has stopped or slowed down some market-reforms, it is portrayed by the bourgeois media and politicians and by the bourgeoisie itself as an obstacle to development as such. Who does not want 'development', and who wants a political formation which is not for 'development'? 'Development' – sometimes packaged as bijli, sadak, pani (electricity, roads and water) in the vast rural periphery — has become a big bourgeois ideology. This is an ideology which helps the ruling classes and their political representatives to buy consent from people. The bourgeoisie (and its government) does not want to give the credit to the Left for propping up a government under which it has benefited both politically (in the sense of both creating governmental stability and keeping a lid on the militancy of workers and peasants) and economically

(in terms of many pro-business policies that the government has implemented despite the Left).

Secondly, in the subnational states where the Left is in power, it behaves like a version of 'Left Congress' at best. This it cannot do. It just cannot criticize the same policies of the central government which it itself adopts in the states in which it rules. By shaking hands with big-business, domestic or foreign, and implementing some of the neoliberal policies, the Left allows bourgeois parties (in their regional incarnations) to opportunistically bear the mantle of pro-poor parties in Left-ruled States and to gain electoral advantage. This is exactly what happened in the largest Left bastion (West Bengal). The Left, of course, does this in the name of creating jobs (as one Left leader put it to me: unless there are industries, there is no working class to mobilize).

Jobs can be created; people's productive power can be developed; modern technology can be adopted (and if necessary obtained from foreign sources); and people can expand their needs which make for a better quality of life. All these and many other things can happen under a variety of social relations of ownership and control of property. A factory owned by the (big) bourgeoisie (on land from which poor peasants have been forcefully displaced) indicates one type of relations. A democratically-run cooperative of (women) workers (producing, in an ecologically sound manner, a thing that satisfies a need of a vast majority of the local/national population) indicates another. Where and when in power, the Left really must show that jobs can be created under a different framework of social relations than those that are corporate-dominated. It is the corporate domination of our lives that both the ruling-class parties (i.e. Congress and BJP) support in exactly equal measure. This, unfortunately, most ordinary people do not understand, and changing this situation is a major ideological challenge for the Left.

In Left-governed states, jobs must be created in a manner in which it is consistent with the Left's ideological premises (one of which is the democratic control over means of production to be used for the satisfaction of basic material-cultural needs of people). Otherwise, the connection between Left theory and Left praxis is broken. It has been broken in these States, which is why many people - including parts of the middle class - may not find much difference between the Left and the two mainstream parties (both of which may chant some anti-poverty rhetoric and/or even throw some crumbs at the poor to buy their votes).

## **MASS MOVEMENTS AND MASS EDUCATION**

Let me return to the issue of 'mass' movements. One important reason for organizing these movements is to get immediate

relief for the oppressed and exploited from factory owners, (upper-caste) landlords and capitalist farmers, big traders and governments. But perhaps more importantly, these movements shape class consciousness of the poor and enhance their political power, which may, from time to time, bear electoral results (which is secondary). In turn, both elections and mass movements – both kinds of Left practice – presuppose ideological education of the masses. The cause becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. Local reading groups and working-class based cultural associations, among other things, are important here.

The political energy of the oppressed and exploited workers' can and must be channeled in productive and progressive directions, the energy that the mainstream parties electorally mobilize in order to continue the current system where a few are growing richer while the vast majority are eking out a minimal existence. The Left must be a part of the everyday life of workers and peasants.

Here it is important to stress the role of the 'middle class' in relation to the revival of the Left. The 'middle class' includes not only the better-paid and educated parts of the working class but also independent educated small entrepreneurs, many of whom happen to be private proprietors because decent salaried work is not available. The 'urban middle class of the mall' must feel that it is 'cool' to be on the Left. They must feel that it is 'un-cool' to accept (American) imperialism, or communalism. They must feel that it is 'un-cool' to accept a system where the country's land, forests, water and machines are owned and controlled by just a minority of the population who determine how we live and how well we live. Vast segments of this middle class must understand that the inequality between the rich and the poor (and more specifically the control of our major resources in the hands of a few and associated exploitation) is not un-connected to such things as caste and gender oppression as well as ecological destruction, the things which many conscientious middle class people find easy to relate to.

One must have faith in 'ideological development and transformation': when we work on our ideas, our ideas about the world change. Running reading groups and discussing radical theory as well as current Left policies/actions (including their shortcomings which are inevitable) in a polite and democratic manner can contribute to a change in the consciousness of sections of the middle class. A large number of middle class people may just care about themselves. But not everyone of them falls in this category. There are many who seriously think that they can make a difference to the world of the poor through individual charity, through participation in political parties of the rich and through some NGO activities. The challenge for the Left is to patiently show that while these things are not absolutely useless modes of

intervening in the world, they have severe limitations because they do not challenge the sources of power of the rich in their control over property and indeed over knowledge (think about newspapers and TV channels owned for profit by big business).

I can say this on the basis of my own experience as a teacher: when middle class people who join the university as students are helped – both in the classroom and outside – to understand the logic of a theory of society which seeks to grasp everything by its roots and which seeks to scientifically explain various forms of oppression and exploitation with a passionate motive to eradicate these, other competing systems of thought which they have been imbued with all their lives start not making sense to them anymore. The more they learn new ideas, the more they unlearn old ideas. Demystification of the reality slowly begins to happen.

The present system can continue as long as the vast majority believe that what is happening is natural, that it is natural that some people will despotically control our productive resources under whom the rest have to work for a wage/salary. An important aim of ideological education is to denaturalize the current state of affairs. One of the biggest losses of the Left is the loss of emphasis on political-ideological education of ordinary workers and peasants as well as sections of the urban middle class. What the Left has lost is the sympathy of a segment of the middle class.

This must be reversed through patient ideological activity in a democratic manner (one in which radical teachers, among others, have an important role to play). Ideas of the Left must be a part of the common-sense of a very large section of the population, including segments of the middle class as well as the working class and poor peasants.

Although the BJP, the party of Hindu fundamentalists, did not get a large number of seats in this election, and this is good news, it must be acknowledged that the combined political strength of the ruling classes (as partly indicated by the combined electoral strength of Congress and BJP) is quite formidable in relation to that of the Left, even if, it must be noted, the Congress barely got 28% of popular votes. It cannot be forgotten at all that whenever there is a possibility of Left resurgence, these two forces will be united (BJP actually indicated as much before the vote counting began), and the ruling classes will not have any problem with it at all. It may be noted that less than 50% of voters endorse either BJP or Congress, the two mainstream parties, which means that even from an electoral standpoint, there is a massive space within which to expand the Left appeal if this appeal is constructed in terms of the firm support for the interests of workers and peasants, oppressed lower castes and women, deprived regions and for a secular polity. The political forces of the Left must be mobilized independently of, and in opposition to, both of these bourgeois-landlord parties. The future of the majority of

India's population depends on the political and ideological strength of Left and democratic forces in every nook and cranny of the country.

## **THE COMING CHALLENGE**

Every defeat is a challenge. That is the law of dialectics in real life. Without Left support to hold parliamentary power, the national Congress-led government will certainly implement even more blatantly pro-business policies. Preparations for a further neoliberal turn have already begun (e.g. privatization of profitmaking government-owned companies; reforms in insurance and retail allowing greater entry of foreign business; labour reforms allowing a free hand to big business to fire employees, and so on). The new Indian government will use the current economic crisis, which has already created massive unemployment (already 1500,000 people have lost their jobs in the export sector hit by the recession), as an excuse to implement policies that benefit big business at the expense of workers and peasants in the name of helping the latter. Big business and its media have already prodded the government to implement these policies. The implementation of these pro-business policies, in a situation of growing unemployment, has contributed to the economic crisis in India.

The policies are bound to sharpen the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and its government on the one hand and workers and peasants on the other. With the Left forces not obliged to support the government, this is a great opportunity for them to do what they should be doing all along: mobilize workers and peasants to undermine and get rid of the system of capitalism-imperialism, the vestiges of landlordism, and various forms of oppression such as those based on gender and caste.

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### **P.S.**

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