

India & the CPI (M): The Great Bengal Verdict and After

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The loud and clear mandate for change in a state that came to symbolise political stagnation and the status quo has been rightly seen as a repetition of 1977 in reverse. That year, the CPI(M) and its allies won an equally impressive victory against the Congress, which along with its offspring TMC has now turned the tables on the entrenched rulers. Then, as now, the winning impulse was democracy, which had a special appeal in a state that experienced more than six years of uninterrupted state-hooligan terror since the early 1970s presided over by Siddhartha Shankar Ray. Beyond this, however, Mandate 2011 has a very different perspective and holds out altogether different possibilities.

The First Spark and the Prairie Fire

An apparently insignificant peasant protest in Singur in late May, when the parliamentary left camp was still dizzy with success (with as much as 80% of total seats in its kitty, leaving a meagre 10% for the TMC) sent out a serious message to those who had ears to hear and eyes to see. Jyoti Basu immediately criticised the government (by implication, mainly the Chief Minister and his principal aide, Industries Minister Nirupam Sen) in front of the electronic media for rushing through such sensitive matters without proper political homework. And we in our very first analysis of the West Bengal poll results observed that the huge success carried “the ill omen of a systems failure that might not be too far away.” (When Success Becomes a Burden, Liberation, July 2006).

The state-people confrontation sharpened, and the CPI(ML) general secretary was even more categorical in his address to the fighting women and men who had assembled to hear him in Singur on 14 September 2006: “if blood flows in Singur, it will wash away the CPI(M)’s seat of power in Kolkata.” Blood did flow – in Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh and other places – generating powerful waves of popular resistance that grew into a veritable tsunami as it crossed Nandigram. It washed away the ‘impregnable’ guard wall of panchayats in early 2008, the next line of defence fell in the parliamentary elections next year, followed by devastating defeats in municipal polls in Kolkata and other towns and cities and finally, the seat of power in the Writers’ Building is gone.

Not that the people’s disgruntlement stemmed from the state government’s repressive measures alone. There have been a hundred other grievances: one of the worst performances in the country on the NREGA front; neglect of irrigation, electrification, warehousing, transportation, marketing and

the other concerns of farmers such as easy loans and remunerative prices; absence of a serious effort to tackle industrial sickness and the unemployment problem; total apathy and malfunctioning in areas like BPL cards and the public distribution system; the “party-state syndrome” or the nagging interference by the “natural rulers” in every aspect of public as well as private life of citizens; and so on and so forth. But the people of West Bengal bore with all these for years together, wise enough to understand that the available alternative – a government run by the TMC, whether alone or in league with the Congress or the BJP – would not perform any better. So willy-nilly, the electorate returned the Left Front to power again and again.

What the series of post-Singur developments (Nandigram, the brazen injustice meted out to Rizwanur Rahman and his family, police firing at Dinhata on rural poor demanding work under NREGA where five were killed, repressions on adivasis in Lalgarh and on various democratic forces in the name of fighting the ‘Maoists menace’...) served to do was to radically alter this mindset. Enough is enough – the people of Bengal cried out in one voice – this bunch of betrayers, this pack of arrogant autocrats must go, come what may! For once, for this historical moment appearing after long 34 years, people stopped bothering about the credibility or dependability of the likely successors to the present government. ‘Away with this government now’, they fumed, ‘we would see what happens next’. It is this sea-change in public mood, this singleness of purpose which gripped the people of Bengal cutting across class, caste and religious divides that determined the outcome of 2011 elections.

Implications of the 13 May Verdict

The latest popular mandate is thus largely a reflection of full five years of mass movement. It is a case – one of the many that history is replete with – of people’s protest and people’s victory manipulated by, and temporarily serving, the interests of anti-people forces. The CPI(M) will never understand these linkages or dialectical relationships; we must.

Huge explosions of extra-parliamentary mass movements – in the villages and meadows of Singur and Nandigram, streets and avenues of Kolkata and other cities, forests and hamlets in Jangalmahal – laid out the ground on which electoral battles developed and inflicted a series of defeats on the ruling parties in the panchayat, Lok Sabha, municipal and now the assembly polls. Mamata Banerjee could score the astounding victory because she was eminently successful in presenting herself as the most energetic, always-the-first-to-reach-the-spot type of leader moving in tune with the masses fighting against injustice and oppression. In the process she not only galvanized the entire Congress camp languishing in political oblivion for so long but also forged a new alliance with certain sections of the Left – attracting wide-ranging support from dissident sections of the CPI(M), parties like the SUCI and Maoist sympathizers alike, and the new combination prevailed decisively over the last-ditch attempt put up by a demoralised and discredited CPI(M) camp to defend itself.

The CPI(ML) and some other Left groups (some other ML organizations, the breakaway forces of the CPI(M) in West Medinipur who fought under the banner of Democratic Communist Party (Marxist), the Mazdoor Kranti Parishad and of course Chhatradhar Mahato, the leader of the Lalgarh movement who contested from jail to the chagrin of the TMC and the Maoists and got more than 20,000 votes after a very brief campaign in the face of enormous difficulties) were the only exception who stood firmly by the fighting people but refused to get swept by the TMC wave. The CPI(ML) polled a total of more than 71,000 votes, the highest till date polled by the party in West Bengal. The independent and spirited assertion of the fighting Left stood in sharp contrast to the performance of the SUCI. This party had allied itself with the TMC, got only two seats (where they had sitting MLAs since 1977) from Ms Banerjee in place of the 12 demanded, and lost one of these. A sharp inner-

party struggle ensued, forcing the leadership to hold two press conferences on consecutive dates: first for announcing the decision not to join the new government and on the next day for declaring that they were pulling out of the alliance.

Foundations of the Fabled Stability

Rather than unleashing a fresh wave of class struggle, the CPI(M) since 1977 relied on state-sponsored relief and reform to broaden its own social base and the Left Front Government (LFG) from day one emphasised moderation and class peace.

The most renowned reforms undertaken by this government was the Operation Barga-Panchayati Raj duo. These two together led to the rise of the middle strata – known to be the best vehicle for conciliating antagonistic class interests – to a new prominence in the social hierarchy of rural Bengal, providing the LFG with a broad and stable social base. The next logical step in Operation Barga (OB) would be to transfer ownership to sharecroppers and thereby implement the basic slogan of land reform, “land to the tiller”. But Jyoti Basu and his colleagues deliberately avoided it, apprehending intensification of class contradictions. Abandoned midstream, OB lost momentum and by late 1980s reversal of land reforms started. Meantime, Panchayati Raj had generated its own vested interests and increasingly came to represent an oppressive, dictatorial party power.

The other face of LFG was unveiled, barely two years after its inception, in Morichjhanpi, an island in the Sunderbans. A cruel evacuation drive was launched against Bangladeshi refugees who were trying to settle there and the scale of repression was incomparably larger than what was to be witnessed later in Nandigram. The morning really showed the day: there would be scores of cases of police brutalities on agitating workers (for example, six striking dock workers in Kolkata were killed in police firing in a single incident in 1979 itself), peasants and others throughout the whole tenure of the LFG. Basu’s message was stern and straightforward: any serious opposition to “the people’s government” would be crushed immediately and ruthlessly.

An Indian model of social democratic rule was thus built up over the years, one that based itself on class collaboration rather than class struggle and preferred stability of government power over turbulence of mass movements. In addition to the reform package, the LFG’s rural base was also bolstered by a coincidence which it efficiently utilised: the spread of the so-called green revolution to the rice growing areas of Eastern India. The resultant enhanced productivity (whatever the long-term negative consequences) benefited rich and middle peasants substantially and there were some trickle-down benefits for the poor, too. The broad support base thus developed and a well-knit, efficient party organisation provided the twin pillars for the fabled stability and ‘invincibility’ of the Left Front government.

But how come the ruling classes did not attempt to destabilise and oust this government the way it did in Kerala in the late 1950s and in West Bengal in 1967 and 1970? In fact such an apprehension was haunting the CPI(M) in the initial years, particularly after the return of Indira Gandhi to power in 1980. Gradually, however, it transpired that the ruling elite were not finding it necessary to tread the beaten track. There were at least two major reasons behind this.

For one, the counterrevolutionary credentials of the CPI(M) in office had already been established by the way the first United Front government in West Bengal unleashed the armed forces of the state to smash the so-called Naxalite movement in the late 1960s. Largely on this basis there developed a Jyoti-Siddhartha-Indira axis, thanks to which CPI(M) leaders (with the exception of Jyotirmay Basu) remained at large during the emergency period even as many prominent leaders of the bourgeois opposition found themselves behind bars. Of course, there was a quid pro quo: the CPI(M) did not

build any struggle worth mentioning in opposition to the emergency and by the party's own subsequent admission remained largely immobilised. Thus at the highest level the party had earned the political trust of the Congress, and of the ruling classes for that matter, well before 1977.

Secondly, unlike the UF governments of late 1960s, the LFG was not a product of class struggle and did not operate in an atmosphere of mass militancy. The CPI(M), as noted above, was now a thoroughly and visibly mellowed lot with no streak even of its militant economism of yesteryears.

In such conditions Ms Gandhi, made wiser by the harrowing experience of the mid-1970s, started her second innings with a new and improved strategy: allow the country's largest left party (and its allies) to operate within the confines of constitutionalism but keep it under constant pressure and work for its complete assimilation in the bourgeois state system. But for this intelligent policy shift – pursued and perfected by all subsequent governments at the centre – the “world record” of the longest serving “communist government” in a bourgeois set-up would not have been possible.

From Class Collaboration to Capitulation

But why and how did the “solid” stability melt into thin air this time round? Over the last three years since the debacle in panchayat polls, leaders in Alimuddin Street and AKG Bhavan have been harping on a set of factors like procedural mistakes in Singur and Nandigram, arrogance of a section of cadres, infiltration of vested interests and bad elements into the party in power, cases of corruption here and there and so on. Simultaneously they have been claiming that a vigorous rectification campaign is, and will be, taking care of the problems – a ridiculous claim that has only served to make them laughing stocks.

In fact this type of ‘self-criticism’ never goes beneath surface phenomena to unravel the political processes responsible for the deviations and degenerations. Equally worthless are the high sounding pieces of advice from liberal bourgeois quarters – often echoed by liberal leaders within the left camp – such as “Change or Perish”.

What kind of change is envisaged here? Obviously, abandonment of all pretensions of leftism and complete and unconditional acceptance of the ideology and political economy of neoliberalism, considered the “in thing” today. But is this not precisely what “Brand Buddha” was famous for? From the attempt to implement the McKinsey recommendations on commercialisation and corporatisation of agriculture under the auspices of MNCs and placing all kinds of restrictions on the trade union movement, to the shameless wooing of the likes of Tata Motors and Salem International and the extreme atrocities in Singur and Nandigram – the Left Front government in its later years behaved and worked perfectly as the managing agent of big capital. Here lies the root cause of the CPI(M)'s isolation from workers and peasants, its traditional vote banks. Even the much talked-about arrogance and other bourgeois vices are necessary attributes or manifestations of a surreptitious process of change in the party's social base and class outlook over the decades. This explains why corruption is so rampant and maybe also why even some otherwise sober, ‘bhadralok’ leaders of the CPI(M) routinely behave so arrogantly.

To be sure, the metamorphosis could not have come about in a day or two. The process started back in late 1980s, when the CPI(M) changed its self perception from a party leading a “transitory government” (committed to a modest programme of relief to the working people and functioning as a weapon of struggle) to a stable and “responsible” one (obliged to compete with and excel over other state governments in the matter of industrialisation and growth) and began to introduce a whole series of policy changes. The original emphasis on the state sector and cottage and small industries was replaced by a policy of industrialisation in the joint (public-private) sector in the 12th

Congress of CPI(M) (1985); the state government adopted a brand-new industrial policy in 1994 mirroring the policy of economic restructuring introduced by the central government in 1991; in 2003 a state level SEZ Act which anticipated the central Act of 2005 was passed... the story has been too long and eventful to be recounted here. Essentially, it was a journey from broadly pro-people reforms to neoliberal reforms, from class collaboration to capitulation. The moral of the story therefore is not "Change or Perish" but "Change and Perish", where "change" refers to neoliberal restructuring of the party's ideology and tactical line.

Of course, "change" could also mean a fundamental course correction, which could perhaps save the CPI (M). But never did this find a place on the party's agenda, nor does it now. On the contrary, if anyone like Abdur Razzak Molla even drops a hint about it, he or she is being censured and, as far as possible, sidelined. This attitude is helping more and more people to see that reinvigoration of the left movement in India can only proceed outside the CPI(M)-LF format and in the shape of a militant left alternative to be built jointly by all committed struggling forces on the left.

Towards a Left Reinvigoration, a Militant Left Alternative

We welcome the fact that the popular verdict is clear and emphatic, not ambiguous or half-hearted. Marxists always prefer a decisive outcome over a halfway compromise because the former helps sharpen the contours of class struggle and redraw the battle lines in a distinct new phase while the latter leaves those lines blurred. Ouster of the incorrigible social democratic government of class collaboration would ultimately help release the forces of class struggle and if with the given balance of political forces this ouster was to come about the way it has, genuine Marxists have no reason to lose heart, nor any to be overwhelmed with joy. We have a lot of hard work to do, simultaneously in two interrelated areas.

We must appreciate and work on the reawakened mass resolve for democracy, dignity and development to build up, step by step, a sustained movement against those who have stolen the fruits of popular struggle to oust an arrogant dictatorial regime. For a starter, we can nail the new government on its own promises. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has declared a cabinet decision to return the 400 acres of land grabbed from unwilling farmers in Singur; while welcoming this decision our party has already come up with a concrete and rational response formulation of the issue (the state must not only return the land but make it cultivable, the state must also provide adequate compensation for all who have been adversely affected by the acquisition including share-croppers, recorded or unrecorded, and landless labourers dependent on the local economy, and provide another option to the owners of the remaining 600 acres since the whole process of acquisition was arbitrary and unjust). Likewise on the issue of democracy, we must press for prosecution and punishment of all perpetrators of massacres, release of all political prisoners booked under draconian laws and withdrawal of false cases slapped on movement activists.

Simultaneously, we must intensify publicist work among the masses and go for patient and purposeful political discussion with broad left forces so as to arrive at a unified understanding about what has actually happened and what needs to be done. All available means and forums should be used for the purpose.

What we need to remember at this hour is that the essential dynamic of Bengal politics goes well beyond the electoral results. We must grasp the dialectics of change as a protracted process comprising several, often mutually contradictory stages. A new chapter in the left movement in India has opened up with the removal of the dead weight of a pseudo-left regime, a new chapter that offers ample opportunities for the growth and coming together of genuine left forces including

honest, thinking sections of the CPI(M). Let us unite to realise this potential and march ahead.

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P.S.

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