

# India: CPI(M) Internal Letter Reveals Bengal's Young Are Still Shifting Support to BJP, TMC

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**This is particularly bad news for the Left party because it has been focusing on increasing its youth base.**

**Kolkata:** The revival of the Left in West Bengal does not appear to be an immediate possibility, as least going by an internal assessment from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) on the party's ever decreasing size and influence on young people.

Nine years since it lost state power to Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) and about two years after ceding the role of principal opposition to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the CPI(M)'s Bengal chapter continues to lose the support of the people aged between 18 and 31. An internal communication of the CPI(M) has revealed that the share of young people among party members is steadily diminishing.

This revelation is being considered crucial because the state is slated to see assembly elections in less than a year - Banerjee's second term ends on May 27, 2021 - and the elections are expected to be a highly polarised battle between the TMC and the BJP. The Left Front has been hoping against hope to tie up with the Congress and pitch the alliance as a third alternative to the state's two principal forces.

The BJP, which recently conducted a membership drive, has claimed it got the most encouraging response from the young. "The majority of our new members are youths," said BJP state unit president Dilip Ghosh.

The TMC, too, recently launched a platform for the young, named Banglar Jubo Shakti, in which six lakh have enrolled as volunteers, according to the party's claim.

## The revelations

'Party letter no 4' of the Bengal CPI(M), which is meant only for members of the party, has expressed concerns over the party's membership status. Following the recently-concluded renewal of the party's membership, it has come to the party's notice that the number of members have dropped from 1,68,042 in 2019 to 1,60,485.

The party had more than three lakh members before 2011, but the numbers came down to 2.56 lakh in 2015 and 1.96 lakh in 2018, according to the party's state unit leaders.

However, what seems to have concerned them most is the diminished number of members under the age of 31. Their share stood at only at 7.68%, down from 9.09% in 2019, according to page 10 of the 32-page letter. In 2015, the share of members up to the age of 31 stood at 13.5%.

This drop is despite the party's decision in 2015 to focus on increasing the share of young members. The party had set the aim of taking the youth share of membership to 20% by 2018. In reality, the share has shrunk further.

These statistics in the recent letter counter the growing public perception that the Left had started regaining lost ground. The perception was created after the CPI(M), following the TMC's 2019 Lok Sabha election debacle, started reclaiming a number of their offices that had allegedly been closed down by TMC supporters. Besides this, the party's events had started drawing more crowds in the immediate aftermath of the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019.

CPI(M) leaders refused to speak on the record on the report, because it is meant for internal communication. However, a senior member of the party's state committee said, requesting anonymity, that the larger crowds observed during anti-CAA protests and relief work during the COVID-19 lockdown and Cyclone Amphan did not reflect in the membership renewal process because it takes several months' association for one to become a member of the party.

"It would not be right to compare the BJP and the TMC's membership with ours. One merely needs to give a missed call to a phone number to become a BJP member. In the TMC, too, membership is a vague issue. However, in our party, one becomes a member after a significant level of involvement. First, one has to be an 'auxiliary group member', and then a 'candidate member' before getting party membership. The process takes time," said a CPI(M) state committee member.

Another CPI(M) leader from Hooghly district said the party intentionally did not renew membership of inactive members.

In the internal letter, the party expressed serious concern about the diminishing youth share and proposed building up 'militant movements' and correcting errors on the part of the leadership.

Another reason for concern was the dwindling number of full timers. In the 22 districts of the state besides Kolkata, the number of full-timers reduced from 1,776 in 2017 to 1,392 in 2020.

"The growth of the party is intrinsically linked with the increase in the number of full-timers," reads a line on page 11.

As a direct impact of reducing membership, the number of branch committees in the 22 districts has come down from 17,471 in 2019 to 15,425 in 2020 and the number of 'area committees' from 788 in 2019 to 734 in 2020.

Other assessments revealed Muslims made up 16.47% of the party's members and women made 10.96%.

### **The implications**

According to political analysts, the CPI(M)'s shrinking size foretells a highly polarised contest between the TMC and the BJP in the 2021 assembly elections.

"For several years now, we have been seeing the CPI(M)'s events crowded by middle-aged people. There are two reasons that attract youth. One is the ideological attraction, which the CPI(M) has lost during its long rule of the state. And the second is the ability to give back, which only parties in power can afford. Naturally, the youth are mostly crowding the rallies of the TMC and the BJP," said Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, former principal of Presidency College.

Psephologist Biswanath Chakraborty, a professor of political science at Rabindra Bharati University,

said that the Left's reducing youth support base is also a reflection of the Left's loss of ideological appeal globally. He thinks the revelations are ominous for the Left's electoral prospects in 2021.

"The CPI(M) in Bengal is caught between the TMC and the BJP. A majority of the Left-leaning intellectuals and ideologues and the teaching community among which the Left still hold certain influence consider the BJP as a greater threat over the TMC. However, at the grassroots level, many party workers and supporters are keen to see the TMC removed first. I had noticed after the 2019 assembly by-election in Karimpur that in some booths the Left got fewer votes than their number of workers because those who wanted to resist BJP voted for the TMC," said Chakraborty.

Chakraborty foresees the Left turning into a fringe political force in the 2021 assembly elections.

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