

India - The West Bengal Elections of 2021: Populist Right wins, Fascists Gain and the Left Disappears

The Rise and Collapse of Left Voting Bases in Bengal

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With quite some time having elapsed since the election results to the West Bengal Assembly were announced on 2 May, we need to start by providing a bird's eye view of the results before probing into details. And this can be summed up by saying that this is the most right-wing Bengal Assembly elected not only in independent India, but even going back to the Government of India Act 1935 and the elections of 1937. In that Assembly the anti-zamindar [1] party of A. K. Fazlul Haque, called the Krishak Praja Party, played an important role. In the elections to the 1946 Assembly, for the first time, three Communist Party of India members, Rup Narayan Ray, Ratanlal Brahman and Jyoti Basu, were elected, and it was this that enabled the CPI to even send, for some time, its sole member of the Constituent Assembly of India, Somnath Lahiri.

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In the West Bengal Assembly of 1952 the CPI emerged as the single biggest opposition party with 28 seats, while the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party received 15, and two factions of the Forward Bloc together received 13 seats. By 1957 this had consolidated to 46 CPI, 21 Praja Socialist Party, 8 Forward Bloc, and just over 36 percent votes for two left alliances combined. In 1957, the Hindu Mahasabha won 25 seats, the peak of the communal right seats till 2021. In 1962, a United Left Front contested the polls, including the CPI, the All India Forward Bloc, the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party [both anti-Stalinist parties] and the Bolshevik Party of India. The Front won 74 seats and the Praja Socialist Party won five seats. All left votes came to around 38 percent while the vote share of the Hindu communal right dwindled to 1.25 percent. In 1967 the ruling Congress was actually defeated and two fronts come together to form a short lived government. The Left parties had over 38 percent, and a split off from the Congress, named Bangla Congress, had a further ten percent, enabling the formation of a UF government. This fell and fresh elections in 1969 saw the United Front return with a bigger margin — just under 50 percent votes and 214 seats. Conflicts between Bangla Congress, CPI and CPI(M) [2] resulted in a collapse of the front.

In 1971 two fronts fought separately. The United Left Front, also known as the Six-Party Coalition, was led by the CPI(M). The United Left Democratic Front, also known as the Eight-Party Coalition,

was led by the CPI. This election finally showed which split from the old CPI was to become hegemonic in West Bengal. The CPI(M) won 113 seats, against the 105 by the Congress (R) [3], 13 by the CPI, and 29 by all other left candidates and parties. In 1972, fresh elections were held, with massive violence and rigging, and the CPI(M)'s vote share came down from 32.9 percent to 27.5 percent. Total left votes still came to over 43 percent, but with the split and the CPI aligned to the Congress, a huge Congress majority was obtained.

In 1977, after five years of a deep rightwing regime under chief minister Siddhartha Sankar Ray, who was a mentor, among others, of current West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee, and after the state of Emergency declared by Mrs Gandhi all over India, the Congress was trounced. In the Assembly elections, the CPI(M) offered an alliance to the Janata Party, but Prafulla Sen, the Janata Party leader made impossible demands and the talks broke down. The result was history. The CPI(M) won 178 seats, the Forward Bloc 25, the RSP 20, the RCPI 3, the Marxist Forward Bloc 3, the Biplobi Bangla Congress 1 and an independent supported by the LF 1—a total of 231 seats and nearly 46 per cent votes. In addition the SUCI with 4 seats, the CPI with 2 seats, the CPI(ML)- PCC with 1 seat and the Workers Party with 1 seat got a further around 5 per cent votes. From 1977 to 2006, the Left Front, in later years with the CPI joining it, won seven successive elections.

In the recent past, it has often been portrayed as though the left majorities after 1977 were mainly obtained through so-called “scientific rigging”, a term popularised by Mamata Banerjee when she was in the opposition. The reason for dwelling on the rise of the left vote is to show that the left popularity grew over a long period and was not dependent on simply the use of state power. The significance of the more recent developments, however, lies in the rapid waning of the left electoral base.

Party	2006	2011	2016	2021
CPIM	176 (37.1%)	40 (30.1%)	26 (19.8%)	0 (4.73%)
CPI	8 (1.9%)	2 (1.8%)	1 (1.45%)	0 (0.2%)
RSP	20 (3.7%)	7 (3%)	3 (1.67%)	0 (0.21%)
FB	23 (5.7%)	11 (4.8%)	2 (2.82%)	0 (0.53%)
Other left	5 (1.3%)	2 (1%)	0 (0.7%)	0 (1.03%) approximately

The other significant development has been the equally startling erasure of the Congress.

2006	2011	2016	2021
21 (14.7%)	42(9.1%)	44 (12.25%)	0 (2.94%)

It is from this overall standpoint that the picture of West Bengal must be assessed. The two parties/fronts that ruled West Bengal from 1947 to 2011 have been virtually wiped out. They are absolutely absent in the Assembly, and their vote share has gone down.

We need both a political explanation of *why* this happened, and an explanation of where the votes went and how? The latter is actually easy to compute, with the Election Commission and other sites having put up large amounts of data.

Who voted and how?

The simplest explanation, that will please a lot of people, not only on the Right but also on the Left

and the tired ex-left, is that the left, especially the CPI(M), while pretending to fight the BJP as well as the TMC, actually pushed its voters to vote for the BJP because 'punishing' the TMC was uppermost in its mind. In 2019, during the parliamentary elections, the RSS had coined a covert campaign slogan, 'agey Ram, pore bam' (first Ram, later the left). This was subsequently foisted onto the CPI(M) by its opponents, who claimed the slogan had emanated from CPI(M) headquarters. Stories abounded about how CPI(M) supporters or cadres had created videos saying they were CPI(M) supporters but were urging people to vote for the BJP. A considerable part of the left and liberal anti-BJP people who came together in many ways to urge people to defeat the BJP, believed this to be a sustained CPI(M) strategy. Given the rise in the BJP vote and the decline in the left vote, they would argue that this is now proved.

However, even a little careful look will show that such an assumption is false. It is first of all questionable, why for every other fake propaganda, the BJP IT Cell will be made responsible, but here we shall take it as gospel truth that the call to go vote BJP indeed emanated from Alimuddin Street [State CPI(M) headquarters]. This reveals more about the prejudice of those critics than about the CPI(M). In addition, this makes two further assumptions. First, that the CPI(M) has a block vote, which it can control in a completely manipulative way, even to the extent of calling on them to vote for a party alien to them. And secondly it is assumed that these people know that it is not the public call of the CPI(M), made through its election manifesto, through the public meetings it held in constituency after constituency, but the hidden whisper campaign that is the true line of the party. With this we reach a level of conspiracy theory that can simply never be refuted, for any data we adduce will be rejected by arguments that say - this was done to provide an eyewash, etc. Moreover, it treats voters, not as human beings who think about their own interests, within the constraints of options open to them, but as chess pieces who can be moved by a small group of parties—or perhaps only and especially the CPI(M). Interestingly, this kind of argument has sometimes come from people hailing from Stalinist parties/politics. What even they fail to recognize is that such bureaucratic control has never been absolute, and it presumes that humans can be treated as less than humans, lacking their independent rational ideas and interests, based on class, community, gender, caste positions and perceptions.

Since the election system in India is not any kind of a proportional representation, but a Westminster style First Past The Post, so the votes have to be disaggregated seat by seat. It is being remarked that the Left votes have gone down even compared to the 2019 Parliamentary elections. In 2019 this was 7.5%, but in 2021, it has come down to 5.67%. However, it is to be noted that in 2019, the Left Front contested from almost all parliamentary seats in West Bengal, covering about 280 out of the 294 assembly segments, while in 2021 it had an alliance with the Congress and the maverick ISF (more of which later), so the total seats contested went down to 177. Therefore, a direct comparison between 2019 and 2021 would be flawed.

If we look at the hard reality, it is of course that the left front parties have become electorally fringe forces as of now in West Bengal. But where did the votes go? This will also indicate the politics of the electorate.

Radical Socialist had argued that there is a real anger at the TMC, and an anti-incumbency. The Radical Socialist call had been based on a linking of our principled stand, that we do not call for votes for bourgeois parties [4] with the practical issue that a None Of The Above button choice is totally uncalled for. So the Radical Socialist call had been almost unique—to vote for the Left Front candidates (but not a vote for their entire alliance, which included the Congress, the historic rightwing party, the party of the Indian ruling class for most of independent India's history). There had been a tactical issue involved. If the Left Front had indeed formed an alliance with the TMC, as one call had gone out, then the BJP would have been the only party standing for that anti-incumbency vote.

But, we will be stopped at once, where is the anti-incumbency vote? The TMC vote increased, did it not? This, once more, is where we again need to look at a seat by seat distribution of votes. In the 2021 elections, elections were held across 292 seats, two being held back due to death of candidates due to Covid. The TMC won 213 seats, the BJP won 77, the GJMM 1 and the ISF (an ally of the CPI(M)) 1. For the BJP this was a leap from 3 seats to 77, for the TMC a growth from 211 in 2016. So one would assume that the entire BJP growth came at the cost of the Left and the Congress. This is where one would assume wrong.

If we look at who won where, we find that the TMC lost 48 of the seats it had held in 2016, to the BJP, the Congress lost 15, the CPI(M) 6, the Forward Bloc 1 and the RSP 2. The BJP dropped one of the three seats it had gained in 2016, thus ending up with 77 seats. So there were seats where the TMC votes did not hold, but swung to the BJP. Indeed, these far outnumbered the seats where the left votes of 2016 went over to the BJP in such large numbers that the BJP won.

A significant seat one should discuss, alongside general trends, is the Nandigram assembly seat. This had been held by the CPI even when it had been blown away across the state in 1977. In 2009, in a bypoll, the CPI lost it. Since then it had been not only a Trinamul Congress stronghold but specifically a Suwendu Adhikari fiefdom. As the Adhikari family jumped into the BJP bandwagon, Mamata Banerjee admitted as much. Contesting from Nandigram to challenge Adhikari, she openly said that she had given Adhikari full control and all manner of advantages in Nandigram, claiming even that to come to this area she had needed clearance from Adhikari. Regardless of whether the last was a bit of a hyperbole or not, it is evident that Nandigram had a strong Adhikari presence, not just a TMC one. In 2016, TMC had defeated CPI by 81,230 votes. In 2021, Adhikari defeated Banerjee by a small margin, 110764 to 108808, with the CPI(M) candidate (not CPI this time) getting just 6267 votes. It was immediately alleged, by some people, especially in the social media which was used so extensively, that the left had deliberately pushed its own voters to the BJP. It is however worth noting that in 2016, the TMC had received 1,34, 623 votes, the CPI 53,393 votes and the BJP 10,713. This shows a number of developments. Votes cast, in absolute numbers, were higher in 2021 than in 2016. If Adhikari was so strong in Nandigram, then we cannot assume that he departed to the BJP like a Buddhist monk, renouncing everything. In March 22, left-wing journalist Arka Bhaduri made a Facebook post on Nandigram. In it, he asserted that “across Nandigam this time, it is an openly communal vote. The BJP has succeeded in creating the poisonous narrative of Hindus versus Muslims....Such firm division I have not seen elsewhere in [West] Bengal.” He was also clear about the prospects for the left, remarking that in most places of the Nandigram Assembly it did not even have an existence. [5] But this shows also, that even if we assume that about 47,000 voters who had voted CPI in 2016 switched to BJP this time, Adhikari received votes from around 52,000 persons who had either voted TMC or had not voted at all, in 2016. [6] Moreover, since the campaign has been specifically that it was the CPI(M) that was responsible for pushing voters to the BJP, one needs an additional explanation why the CPI did the same thing. Finally, if the division was indeed a communally polarized one, then one would expect Muslims who had formerly voted for the CPI to swing to the TMC and Hindus who had voted for the CPI as well as the TMC to swing to the BJP. But the point remains, that even in Nandigram, even assuming [as we do not, but as many far left and ex-lefts argued] every last voter who had voted CPI in 2016 and did not vote CPI(M) this time MUST be counted as a BJP voter, the BJP took more from the TMC than from the left.

There are indeed seats where the TMC got seats because the left still retained some support, regardless of what one thinks of the choice of their candidates. In Diamond Harbour the TMC defeated the BJP by a margin of just a few short of 17000 votes. Pratik Ur Rahman of the CPI(M) got 38719 votes. Had the CPI(M) been driving its voters, and had they behaved like the tame herds the critics cum amateur psephologists claim, this seat would have gone to the BJP. In Rajarhat-Gopalpur the CPI(M)'s vote was almost equal to the TMC's margin over the BJP.

Finally, we come to an analysis of the 77 seats. As we saw, 48 of these were wrested from the TMC. Therefore, it is evident that the TMC votes had gone down. Here are three examples from North Bengal - Mathabhanga, Coochbehar Dakshin and Dinhata. Here in North Bengal the left has clearly lost much of its base to the BJP, a very large part, interestingly, in Dalit areas. The left has been (often legitimately) criticized for being inadequately sensitized to caste oppression. But when we see that the Dalit votes have shifted to the BJP, and in greater numbers than those lost to the left, it is evident that the story is more complex. One can argue that Dalits gave up on the left parties because the left is savarna, arrogant. Or one can say that the left deliberately pushed its committed people to BJP. But one cannot do both at the same time. If Dalit voters deserted the left for the BJP, that was not because they were asserting any radical Dalit identity but were being successfully integrated into the Hindutva project.

2016 Mathabhanga	TMC96383	LF 64465 (CPIM)	BJP 31258
2019 Mathabhanga	86470	7553	112146
2016 Coochbehar Dakshin	82849	64654 (FB)	18176
2019 Coochbehar Dakshin	86629	10246	91560
2016 Dinhata	100732	78939	25542
2019 Dinhata	115978	6069	116035

So adding the Left and the BJP votes for Mathabhanga in 2016 we get 95723, and for 2021—119699. The TMC vote share dropped by 9913. In other words, even assuming that all CPIM voters who turned their backs on the CPI(M) voted BJP we need to recognize that the TMC vote was down. In Coochbehar Dakshin the TMC vote was up about 3800. But the BJP polled close to 10,000 votes from voters who had not voted the left, again assuming all left votes lost went to the BJP. What these figures actually reveal is the utter collapse of the left, but also the existence of a distinct anti-incumbency attitude among sections of people who had voted for the TMC in 2016. Perhaps this is exemplified above all by the Left-Congress alliance's prize North Bengal seat, the Siliguri Assembly constituency. In 2016, Asok Bhattacharya had won with 78054 votes, with the TMC coming second with 63982 votes. The BJP had been a significant force but a distant third, with 19300 votes. In 2021, the BJP won with 89370 votes. Sankar Ghosh, the candidate, was a former CPI(M) member who had left (his stance)/ had been expelled (the CPIM stance). But Bhattacharya had certainly not been covertly egging him, when Bhattacharya was formally busy expelling him. Om Prakash Mishra of the TMC came second with 53784 votes, showing a drop of almost 10200 votes. Bhattacharya got 28835 votes. Since in 2016 the total votes polled by the CPI(M) and the BJP had been 97354, and this time the BJP polled 89370 while Bhattacharya held on to 28835, it is evident that once again, anti-incumbency was as much a factor pushing people to the BJP as the drift from the CPI(M). The ten thousand votes reduction in the TMC vote shows that people here did not like the idea of voting TMC. What we need to ask, of course, is why the anti-incumbency wind, where it existed, was pulled entirely in the direction of the BJP?

Before going into that, and other discussions, I want to finish talking about the 77 seats. That the Left lost more of its seats to the TMC than to the BJP indicates that overall, in seats that the left had won, voters who had voted Left in 2016 swung to the TMC. This again calls for further number crunching. The TMC vote rose to 47.94% in 2021. I have shown that there were seats where the TMC lost, and not only did its share go down, but even the absolute numbers compared to 2016. Even if we were to assume that all votes lost, not only by the Left Front but also by the Congress, went to the BJP, something that has been refuted for particular seats in the foregoing discussions, there remain unanswered questions. Left votes came down from 25.74% to 5.67%, and the Congress votes from 12.25% to 2.94%. That is 29.38%. Since I have demonstrated that some of the left vote

definitely went to the TMC, and since it is extremely difficult to swallow the idea that the Muslims who had formerly voted Congress in districts like Murshidabad and Malda this time voted BJP, it is even more difficult to swallow any claim that all former Congress voters of 2016 pressed on the lotus symbol this time. The 2021 votes for the three major parties/fronts for Murshidabad district assembly seats is given below, and it actually reveals something very different, as we will discuss in the next section.

Seat	BJP	Congress (LF mentioned where applicable)	2021	TMC 2016 Victor
Farakka	42374	36205	102319	Congress
Suti	56650	18760	127351	Congress
RaghunathGanj	28521	12799	126834	Congress
Sagardihi	44983	36344	95189	TMC
Lalgola	29464	47153	107860	Congress
Bhagabangola	16707	47787 (CPI-M)	153795	CPI(M)
Raninagar	21138	55255	134957	Congress
Murshidabad	95967	28835	93476	Congress
Khargram	60682	27423	93255	Congress
Burwan	79141	12260	81890	Congress
Kandi	57319	27555	95399	Congress
Bharatpur	53143	30116	96226	Congress
Rejinagar	50226	37282	118494	Congress
Beldanga	59030	26949	112862	Congress
Baharampur	89340	40167	62488	Congress
Hariharpara	18378	88594	102660	TMC
Jalangi	43773	44564 (CPI-M)	123840	CPI(M)
Nowda	43531	31588	117684	Congress
Domkal	12348	80442 (CPI-M)	127671	CPI(M)
Nabagram	64922	39129 (CPI-M)	100455	CPI (M)

What is clear is that had the CPI(M) been driving its voters to the BJP, Nabagram might have gone to that party. In Domkal, Bhagabangola and even Jalangi by a slender margin, the CPI(M) actually came second, showing that it had actually fought wherever and to whatever extent it could. As for the Congress, the major player in Murshidabad all these years, there is clear enough evidence that its votes shifted massively in the direction of the TMC, not to the BJP. The voting was along communal lines, to a certain extent, with the BJP drawing a section of Hindu voters, who could have voted Left, Congress, or TMC previously, though far from all of them.

One final aspect in discussing who voted and why? This is the most difficult to pin down. The question is of how women voted. Both during, and even more after the results came out, there were strong proclamations that women had voted in far greater proportions for the TMC, than had men. A number of reasons were put forward. Three major arguments were, that the TMC has taken a series of women friendly steps within its own framework. These, we need to add, are at times regressive, such as the government policy of providing funding for the marriage of poor girls. Feminists/women's rights groups strongly objected when this was pushed. The vast range of

conditional cash transfer schemes targeting women and young girl-students offered by the TMC government, however, established it as a clear favourite among its beneficiaries, even though some were actually repackaged previous programmes. In particular, Mamata Banerjee's direct association with the conception, naming, implementation, and propagation of the schemes reinforced her identity as a supposedly woman-friendly CM among women and girls in the state. It is also a matter of fact that the TMC did put up 50 women candidates, against the relatively fewer BJP women faces, presented a continuous image of being 'pro-women'. Finally, the election campaign itself needs to be mentioned. The TMC campaign was all about Mamata Banerjee. Before the elections, we had the 'Didike bolo' ['tell didi(elder sister)] programme, with her face and a phone number to lodge one's complaints. During the elections there was the face of Mamata Banerjee with the slogan Bangla Nijer Meyekei Chay - Bengal wants its own daughter. This was contrasted with Modi's campaigns to show the BJP as a party of outsiders, and the meetings where he shouted into the mike—'didi-o-didi' in a tone reminiscent of lumpen elements taunting single women out on the streets. Tame crowds in the meetings may have laughed, but political commentators suggested these seriously angered women. The threat to women more generally, by BJP leaders like UP CM Adityanath, who promised a so-called anti-Romeo action and a 'love jihad' law (ie, banning inter community marriage without government approval, something he has done in UP) may have angered a lot of women.

The total number of women voters had gone up, in both absolute and relative terms. According to the EC data, West Bengal had women as 49% of the state's 72 million electorate, with the gender ratio moving to 961 women per 1000, up from 956 to 1000 in 2020.

But how many more women voted than men for the TMC. How independent are women in our society? Sexism, male control, are still quite extensive. It has been observed that very often, at the panchayat or municipal level, the seats reserved for women go to the wives/close kin of the previous sitting male member, and they de facto control the office. Hard data about how various castes, communities voted can be worked out relatively easily. Data on how women voted is uncertain. Nonetheless, post-poll surveys suggest a more nuanced picture than the sweeping assertion that women voted more for TMC/Mamata Banerjee. According to data released by Lokniti-Centre for Study of Developing Societies, TMC had a 6 percentage point lead among women compared to men in both the 2016 Assembly elections and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. This means that 6 percentage points more women voted for TMC as compared to men in West Bengal. This difference actually reduced to 4 percentage points in 2021. What led to the TMC's win was an overall increase in vote share across genders. For instance, the survey says that TMC's vote share among men increased from 41 percent to 46 percent and among women from 47 percent to 50 percent between the 2019 Lok Sabha polls and the 2021 Assembly elections. The CSDS survey shows that, Adivasi women, Upper Caste women and women from the poorer income brackets differed significantly from men in the same category in their support for the TMC. What must worry, not merely the TMC, but leftists of any shade, was the BJP leading among Dalit and OBC women. However, the CSDS data also showed the TMC enjoying a huge lead among poorer women overall. So we need to conclude that the hype about women voting as women is a middle class journalistic hype, taken up by others as well.

Polarisation, Money Power, State Power and Corporatized Elections:

So, we now need to look beyond numbers, and seek reasons. The Murshidabad vote is an important point of departure. West Bengal has over 27 percent Muslims, about double the national average. Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur were the three districts with Muslims in majority or numerically more than Hindus, according to the census of 2011. In Murshidabad it was 66.27%. In Malda it was 51.27% and in Uttar Dinajpur 49.92% (where the Hindu population was 49.31% and

the remainder were mostly Christians). There has never been such a determined attempt at religious polarization as this time. Prime Minister Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, and UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath all campaigned loudly and aggressively. Bengali Muslims have been threatened, treated as 'infiltrators', for many years elsewhere in India. The CAA and the threat of an all India NRC, plus the Assam experience, brought the matter into sharp focus since 1919. To give just one example, after Shaheen Bagh, Park Circus in Kolkata was possibly the most sustained site for anti CAA, anti NRC campaign led by Muslim women. [7] As a result, the imagined Muslim block vote, which had not existed outside Hindutva propaganda so far, was forced to come into existence. With Shah threatening the NRC as soon as Covid threats went down, with Adityanath calling Muslims two-legged beasts, with targeted shooting of voters by the central forces early during the fourth day of voting at Shitalkuchi constituency (by looking at their dresses), Muslims were made violently aware of what lies in wait for them if the BJP comes to power in West Bengal. Even those who did not know the full details of what has been happening in UP for the last four years could see and feel for themselves. And the fact that unlike the case of Gujarat 2002, Muslims in West Bengal do often have kin in UP meant that there has been a steady private flow of information about the kind of repression Muslims have faced. So there was a massive consolidation of Muslims, a decision, not from any fatwa, not by any Imam proclaiming anything as in the past political parties have occasionally attempted, but by a grassroots decision, that the strongest party that can form a government and repel the BJP must be strengthened at any cost.

In the short run, there has not been a corresponding level of Hindu polarization. This is clear from the sweep of the TMC. However, we must again remember that this is a first past the post style. The TMC garnered, across West Bengal, close to 28,735,420 votes, against the BJP's 22,850,710 votes. In absolute terms this is a matter of grave concern. Over 22 million (closer to 23 million) persons voted for BJP. This was down in terms of percentage from the 2019 parliamentary elections, but a massive rise compared to 2016.

If nonetheless there is a general loss of spirit in the ultra-right camp, that is with good reason. They had taken, not the 2016 Assembly election results, but the 2019 parliamentary vote, as the benchmark, and had set themselves the goal of improving n that in a big way over the next two years so that they could capture the West Bengal assembly. To this end, they used an immense sum of money, and abused state power in all possible ways.

Just how much money did the BJP spend, and in what ways? There may never be a precise estimate. Some data is however at hand. BJP leader and former governor Tathagata Roy tweeted: "It must not be forgotten that a BJP electoral ticket carries with it substantial money for running the election. Or for other purposes!".

A conservative estimate would put the close to 100 rallies organised for the BJP top brass at Rs. 5-10 crore per rally, or a total of between 500 and 1000 crores. Selecting the middle point we get 750 crore, or about \$103 million. Estimating the above 200 rallies by lesser luminaries at about Rs 2 crores would add a further Rs 400 crore, or just under \$55 million.

On 21 April, *The Statesman* reported that around 100 crores had been spent on payment for flights (planes, helicopters) for leaders, with Modi, Amit Shah, Smriti Irani, Yogi Adityanath and other BJP leaders accounting for the bulk. The estimate is that the BJP spent over 90 percent. [8] Which means about 90 crore rupees or \$12.4 million. Then there are the expenses for booth and voter management, miscellaneous other purposes, publicity expenses (banners, posters, newspaper and television ads, social media ads, the massive IT cell that was maintained, etc). These could collectively amount to around 500 crore rupees or close to \$69 million. So we are looking at somewhere around Rs 1700-1800 crores in all. Journalist Nalini Singh in an article pegged it higher, at around Rs. 2,500 crores. [9]

No party could come anywhere close to this. A blitzkrieg was launched, with Amit Shah claiming that they would get 200 seats. Another dimension of the blitz was the roping in of the media. BJP's most loyal TV channels immediately got into the act. Arnab Goswami of Republic TV, whose leaked whatsapp chat reveals he was privy to how the Pulwama event was being planned beforehand, launched a Bangla version of his channel and camped in West Bengal. Barring a handful of printed papers and about a couple of local channels close to the TMC, all were aligned with the BJP.

The use, or strictly speaking abuse of state power was blatant this time. On the pretext that West Bengal is particularly prone to electoral violence; an eight phase election schedule was announced by the supposedly independent Election Commission of India. One would have to assume that the pre-election Muzaffarnagar communalisation had not occurred in UP, or that Buddhist principles of non-violence prevail elsewhere in India. The way the seats were distributed around the phases did two things. In the 2019 Parliamentary elections the BJP had won 18 seats. Seats it was likely to win were computed on that basis and in a majority of cases their votes came in the earlier phases. Suwendu Adhikari, the TMC leader who had crossed over to the BJP, supposedly having also suborned a large chunk of the TMC's North Bengal functionaries, was contesting from Nandigram, where he was challenged by Mamata Banerjee. His seat came in phase 2, so that he would be free to move around thereafter. Of course the BJP did not count on Mamata Banerjee staking it all on Nandigram and not contesting from a second, safer seat. The spread was also such that any day there was a vote somewhere (hence no campaigning), Narendra Modi or Amit Shah could campaign in a nearby seat which was not having votes. A huge number of police personnel were called from outside West Bengal, notably from UP. There is no doubt that as Home Minister, Mamata Banerjee has ensured that the police force is under her control. A right wing politician, she has also used this police force for many purposes which are far from nice, including the use of the notorious Unlawful Activities Prevention Act or UAPA to arrest alleged and real Maoists, the use of cyber-crime laws to file a case against a pro-CPI(M) professor for re-circulating a meme against her, the use of police to attack strikes, and the rest. [10] But the use of the EC to bring in droves of police from BJP ruled UP did not show any sign of neutrality. Moreover, during the elections, there were complaints from Presiding Officers that they were being forced to give written permission to fire, well in advance of any conflict flaring up. Senior police officers were changed at the whim of the EC and its observers at the drop of a hat. The Superintendent of Police of Cooch Behar was changed just before the polling, and it has been widely accused that the firing at Sitalkuchi has a connection with this. The TMC made such a complaint, and so did others, including Radical Socialist, which electorally had not called for a vote to the TMC (had indeed called primarily for a vote to the Left Front though not its bourgeois ally the Congress). The de facto fusion of the EC with the BJP was finally shown with utmost clarity over two issues - the swift 24 hour ban on Mamata Banerjee campaigning, while open spread of inter-community hatred by so many BJP leaders were ignored, and at the end only a couple of minnows were given some marginal bans, and then, the appointment of Sunil Arora, Chief Election Commissioner, as Governor of Goa within days of his ending his term as CEC.

Not having at her disposal either the kind of funds that the BJP had, nor the control over supposedly autonomous bodies like the EC, the TMC supremo had adopted a different strategy. After the shock she received in 2019, when the BJP managed to push up its tally of parliamentary seats in West Bengal to 18 out of a total 42, one of her major decisions was to hire Prashant Kishor. Kishor is a professional political strategist who will work for hire. In 2011 he worked for the BJP, helping Narendra Modi secure the BJP's third election victory under his leadership to the Gujarat Assembly. In 2014 he worked for the BJP's national campaign which brought Modi to power. He has also worked for the Janata Dal (United) for the Bihar elections of 2015, for the Congress for the Punjab elections of 2017, for the Congress again in UP (his one major disaster), for the YSRCP of Andhra (2019 elections), for the Aam Aadmi Party for the Delhi 2020 elections. So there is nothing ideological about him. He will work for and will devise tactics, on balance successfully, for whoever

has hired him. This represents a major shift in how elections are to be fought.

If one looks at policies, one will find a series of actions that did have some positive impact. Especially due to the lockdown since March 2020, policies that put some (any) amount of money in the hands of the poor were beneficial for them. Since some of these programmes were pre-lockdown, one cannot argue that this was entirely a planned move. What does appear is a difference, though. The TMC and its supremo are as opposed to popular social movements as Modi. However, while the RSS wants to deploy a fascist solution, which means using an aggressive nationalist ideology to silence social movements, the TMC approach is slightly different. It too will move against any and every autonomous movement of workers and peasants, contrary to what its recent devotees claim. As late as the November 26 General Strike, close to 450 persons were arrested by police in West Bengal in a determined bid to break the strike. [11] Where it does not openly break up strikes it sides with the bosses. This was the case in the tea gardens, where after a protracted strike, the government called for a tripartite negotiation and imposed the terms the bosses had offered. [12]

However, this is where the line between Mamata Banerjee and the TMC swings sharply away from Modi and the BJP. The BJP-RSS is committed to a fascist solution, and is therefore closely aligned with the desires of the Indian big bourgeoisie. Ever since it came to power it was pushing for labour law 'reform'. [13] Eventually, the proposed labour code was pushed through parliament in 2019-2020. In the words of *Economic Times*, "The labour ministry has amalgamated 29 labour laws into four Codes to significantly reduce compliance burden, improve the ease of doing business, make hiring and firing of workers easier and provide enhanced flexibility to employers in terms of work hours." [14] The ideology of a nation standing above all class distinctions is an ideological cover for the actual exploitation of labour, sharply intensified under the BJP government through state action. The TMC by contrast has shaped up as a right wing populist party. Fighting the CPI(M) on its turf, in West Bengal, Banerjee required instruments that could dislodge it. The CPI(M)'s turn to neoliberalism in government gave her the handle. This populism has many dimensions. Only a few can be mentioned here. Though Ms. Banerjee received a substantial support in 2007 from intellectuals, she was sceptical about how protracted such support would be (with good reason). So she looked at populist substitutions. In the cultural field, for example this took the form of replacing the CPI(M)'s patronage of 'high culture', 'art films' etc by a more populist drive. One needs to look at the transformation of the film festival scene. Originally something developed to just collect and show art films, from 1995 it became the KIFF, with sections for competition etc. But in her hands, it was to again be partially transformed, and a section on mainstream Bombay-Tollygunge films added.

Realizing that the bulk of the working class was now unorganised, she took the decision to flout Government's declared policy and to underpay Dearness Allowance to government employees and related sectors. In reality this was a benchmark which others could use. But as the organised sector declined, it became possible to stop pointing to capitalists, and instead to suggest that it was the organised labour force that was privileged. So refusal to pay DA, a rightwing, anti-working class act, could be dressed up in populist garb. Instead, government funds were used for low-wage work for some very poor, marginal people. Money went to clubs for fairs, Durga Pujas etc. This mobilized a large social base. This also had a later effect—when Modi, Shah and others accused her of being anti-Hindu, they could be laughed out of court by her supporters, who were able to point to this sustained support for the most significant Bengali Hindu festival. Along with this went her bid to weaken all democratic institutions—the State human Rights Commission, the Women's Commission, the elected municipalities and panchayats. One can think of the Left-Congress alliance winning the Siliguri elections and the government responding by channeling funds through a bureaucratic structure rather than through the Corporation. In the period of Covid crisis and lockdown, the projects she undertook, whether the Swasthya Sathi project, or various fund transfers, were generally from-above, populist moves, but they came across as real benefits to people who had so

little.

There was also an attempt at targeting funds through these, looking at specific social layers. In the last full budget of her government before the elections, a number of populist schemes were announced.

The Finance Minister Amit Mitra introduced new pension schemes for the elderly of the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Around Rs 2,500 crore has been allocated for the pension scheme for SCs, titled 'Bandhu Prakalpa'. It will provide Rs 1,000 to those from the community above 60 years of age and not covered by any other pension scheme.

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) government has also allocated Rs 500 crore towards a social security scheme targeting unorganised workers in construction, transport and other sectors. The scheme will be fully funded by the state government, which will make a monthly payment of Rs 55 per beneficiary, thereby covering health insurance premiums, compensation for accident benefits, any other free health benefits, among others. This scheme replaces an existing one where the beneficiaries made a monthly contribution of Rs 25 and the state government paid an additional Rs 30 per month.

That this was done with an eye to the 2021 elections was lost on nobody, and BJP leader Dilip Ghosh accused her of bribing people for votes. The point of course is that while neither TMC nor BJP will be fighting for imposing higher taxes on the wealthy, the electoral needs are sought to be satisfied in very different ways. The BJP tried the pogrom route it had done in Gujarat in 2002, and in UP in recent years. The TMC tried the patronage route.

Caste and Community in a “Classless” Election, and the ISF

The BJP had made a few targeted moves. One was to project the Muslims as the ultimate “other”, in a bid to consolidate all Hindus. As we have seen, this did not work out in the short run, with Muslims being forced into a defensive block overcoming party preferences, and voting for whoever was most likely to provide a strong government, by which people primarily meant, as did Mamata Banerjee herself during the campaigns, a government with above two hundred MLAs supporting it. In the last five years the BJP has lost many state assembly elections but subsequently formed the government by getting MLAs to switch sides, or use the Governor or the President to topple elected governments in several dubious ways. One can mention Madhya Pradesh and Haryana, and the murky case of Karnataka. As a result, it is certain that this, much more than any so-called Muslim appeasement, led to Muslims consolidating behind the TMC.

The caste politics and politics of identity were also played by the BJP with considerable skill. At this point we need to start with the left. It has to be understood that the Indian left, especially but not solely the CPI(M), have a narrow definition of class that actually ignores real oppression. If one sneers at every assertion of Dalit identity as fake identity politics, while doing nothing concrete about the oppression of Dalits, then the universality of class one is highlighting is a spurious universality. As a result, in West Bengal, where the leadership of the mainstream left, and till recently the rest as well, was heavily older males of dominant caste origin, issues of Dalits and Adivasis were given even less attention than issues of Muslims.

That the Left Front in power did not pay attention to Muslims beyond lip service was bought out cruelly by the Sachar Committee report. The report, released in December 2006, put Bengal in the “worst-performer category.” The share of Muslims in government jobs was 4.2%. The Sachar report also pointed out that there were no Muslims in senior positions in state public sector units in Bengal.

The state came third on Muslim dropout rates as well as cases of children not going to school. [15] Rather than acknowledge flaws, the CPI(M) went on the offensive, accusing Sachar of not giving due attention to what the state government had done, and got two party members, one of whom is a very important leader, to present some alternative data. [16]

Nonetheless, has Mamata Banerjee not shown distinct signs of 'Muslim appeasement'? So massively has the BJP and its tame media spread this story, that lots of people, not only outside but also in West Bengal, have believed it at least partially. We hope to show that little has been done concretely for Muslims. What has been done can actually be called balancing two brands of soft communalism as a response to the RSS hard Hindutva.

So first, about the social and economic conditions of Muslims as a community. The much-publicised appeasement policy includes remunerations to imams and muezzins or prayer callers by the State Auqaf Board (stipends for imams), hosting of allegedly expensive Iftar parties by the government and extensive temporary residential arrangements for Hajis in the state capital. In a series of speeches, Adhikari attacked Mamata Banerjee as Mumtaz Begum. This was something that was being done covertly, through whatsapp, for nearly five years. But such a brazen communal attack in public showed that communal aggressiveness of the Hindutva brigade was beginning to be swallowed by many.

One of the recent claims that have been put forward stresses that Muslims are now getting more jobs at the expense of the Hindus. So what exactly is the reality? Apparently Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2018, has shown that there has been a significant increase (17 per cent in 2018) of Muslims in government and public sector jobs. [17]

The source of PLFS data is a sample survey by the NSS. Its primary objective is not to estimate the participation of social groups in government jobs and thus the figures mentioned in the article could be misleading. These estimates have a very high margin of error as the number of observations pertaining to people having government jobs in the surveyed data is very low. For example, the sample size for the government employees in West Bengal were 773 in PLFS 1 and 739 in PLFS 2.

Staff Census data, on the government employment, published by the Government of West Bengal, show a marginal increase (less than 1 percentage point) in the representation of Muslims in the government jobs from 2008 to 2016. In 2008 only 5.19 per cent of the total 3,47,798 state government employees were from the Muslim community. In 2015-16, a slight, not a huge growth was recorded — it went up to 6.08 per cent.

Mamata Banerjee did respond to Muslim support for her by putting up more Muslim candidates in 2016. With the Congress and the Left also putting up and winning some, the 2016-2021 Assembly had around 20 percent Muslim members. This is far from any appeasement as the figures are less than the proportion of Muslims in the province. But the BJP's aggressive anti-Muslim campaign apparently succeeded in driving Mamata Banerjee on the backfoot. In 2021, she campaigned along soft Hindu lines, reciting the chandi mantra, declaring her gotra (caste identity), etc, as well as putting up fewer Muslim candidates.

The myth of Muslim appeasement actually refers to certain ham-handed attempts at turning to Muslim clerics, or to Muslim fundamentalist elements, in the totally erroneous belief that these people represent all Muslims. What is important to note, here as well, is that any attempt at autonomous organisation has been attacked. This is where we need to look at the ISF attempt. Abbas Siddiqui, a member of the Furfura Sharif Pir family, floated the Indian Secular Front, with a number of Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim groups in it. The CPI(M) and the Congress also tied up with the ISF. The previous record of Siddiqui has him taking an aggressive stance over the killing of a

teacher in France in connection with supposedly showing a picture of Hazrat Muhammad, and his misogynist comment concerning the absence of TMC MMP Nusrat Jahan and her absence from parliament when the CAA was passed. Certainly he showed a strong degree of Muslim communalism and misogyny over those two incidents.

What was revealing was the selective show of anger. This was done by pro TMC people, by pro TMC leftists, as well as by sections of the CPI(M)'s supporters. We leave aside the RSS-BJP sector, for whom all Muslims are fundamentalist by their very existence.

Three brief remarks need to be made. The comment about Muhammad's photo etc, falls in a pattern that is not unique. This does not excuse Siddiqui. But it is possible to find Kabir Suman, a well-known song writer and singer, a former TMC MP, making a similar comment over the same incident in France and the 'progressives' who flew into a tizzy over Siddiqui keeping silent rather than condemning Suman. It is possible to find the same degree of misogyny in every political party. Not all are as crude as Siddiqui, so while he called for Nusrat Jahan to be flogged, others have taken the route of insinuating that rape survivors are really sex workers who fell out over the payment (TMC in connection with the case of the late Suzette Jordan), that women political opponents are like sex workers (Anil Basu of CPIM concerning Mamata Banerjee). Radical Socialist has had a record of consistently taking positions over all these cases, condemning the use of the sex worker identity as a term of abuse as well as the misogyny involved in attacks on women. We are therefore consistent in condemning Siddiqui as well. But if misogyny is to be an adequate ground for reading people out of the political field, then there is no way one could call for a vote for the TMC.

The main reason why TMC absorbing equally communal figures like Twaha Siddiqui (a cousin of Abbas) or more recently the bulk of AIMIM's West Bengal leaders was acceptable, but not Abbas Siddiqui setting up the ISF, seems to stem not from any 'secular democratic outlook' but an upper caste (savarna) politics. If the ISF succeeds in implanting itself in the long term, instead of fading away after the current elections where it won only one seat, it may be creating a new political voice, where a combination of traditionalist, conservative values mix with the assertion of rights of dalits, Muslims, adivasis.

It is significant that even now, if Muslims are in the leadership, the organisation has to go out of its way to name itself Secular (and still be branded fundamentalist). The ISF included Rashtriya Dalit Ekta Manch, Bharat Jokat Majhi Pargana Mahal, Adivasi Samanwaya Manch, and a number of other Dalit, OBC and Adivasi organisations, not just Muslims. In his television interview, Abbas Siddiqui acknowledged some errors. But what was significant was the body language of Suman De, carrying out the interview. When interviewing a rabid hater like BJP's Dilip Ghosh, the same De was all smarmy. But he was really attacking Siddiqui, shooting off question after question and not even having the courtesy of letting him finish his answers. [18] If one took a purist stance that the regressive remarks of Siddiqui made the ISF totally unfit, and went on to declare that the same purism meant that fighting fascism or not, one can only boycott the polls, we can at least acknowledge a consistency, even though totally disagreeing. But when Siddiqui is attacked but the same crimes of savarna politicians of one's choice are forgiven, that shows not just hypocrisy but a deep-rooted Islamophobia, because of which the BJP could get the over 22 million votes.

If the ISF did not make a huge splash, it did win one seat (with 45 per cent of the votes cast in the seat), and got considerable votes in a few other seats, some of which are mentioned here. In Amdanga, it was to come third, but polled 50905 votes (24.04%). Simul Soren, President of ISF, contested from Haripal and got over 15,000 votes (7.15%), in Mandirbazar (SC) constituency its candidate polled 25397 votes (12.73%). From Sandeshkhali (ST) its candidate got 14387 votes (6.99%). From Uluberia East the ISF polled over 30,000 votes (15.78%). From Kulpi its candidate received 29961 votes at 15.51%.

The area where the BJP was able to make a dent in 2019, and to which it clung on more or less in 2021, was among Dalits. Here too the failure of the left led to a major shift. A significant part of the Dalits of Eastern Bengal left that country in numerous waves, not immediately after 1947. In the period 1947-1967 the left had fought for refugee resettlement, and had reaped electoral benefits by implanting itself solidly in many areas where the refugees had settled.

However, there had been no caste-linked approach for the Dalits. Atul Kohli's paper 'The Rise of Reform Communism in West Bengal', shows that during Congress dominated cabinets in West Bengal (1952-62), the percentage share of ministers belonging to SC/ST and Muslim communities were 2.3 per cent, 6.9 per cent and 12.7 per cent respectively. During CPI (M) dominated cabinets (1977-1982), however, these figures were reduced to 1.5, 1.5 and 7.1 per cent respectively.

Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, who had in the 1970s and 1980s carried out pioneering work on the Namasudra community of Bengal, and who remains one of the foremost scholars studying caste histories in Bengal, wrote a few articles between 2019 and 2021 on the Matua voters of West Bengal. Bandyopadhyay wrote in his 2021 article, While a section of the Dalits under the leadership of Namasudra leader Jogendra Nath Mandal joined Dr Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Caste Federation and opposed Partition, another large segment under the leadership of P R Thakur, also a Namasudra, supported the Hindu Mahasabha-Congress instigated campaign to divide Bengal and create West Bengal as a Hindu majority state within India.

But the result of the partition was bad. The Rajbanshi lands were divided, and the Namasudra lands mostly went to Pakistan. The riots of 1950 caused a mass exodus of Dalits, mostly peasants and fisherfolk, from East to West Bengal. But on arrival in India these Dalit refugees were first put in refugee camps and then dispersed to Andaman Island and Dandakaranya (an arid area between Odisha, Madhya Pradesh etc) for resettlement. Those who did not go to camps settled in the border districts of North 24-Parganas and Nadia. So in the immediate post-Partition era, refugee relief seemed to swallow up caste movements.

Disillusioned with the Congress, P.R. Thakur focused on a heterodox, anti-Brahminical sect, the Matuas, started by his great grandfather and grandfather, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. By the 1990s, Bandyopadhyay stresses, the Namasudras had regrouped, and were seeking to develop a bargaining position vis-à-vis the political parties.

A major concern for the Dalits in West Bengal is the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003, which put the cut off date for arrival to India to get citizenship for refugees at March 1971. In 2009, Mamata Banerjee added the Matuas to the list of groups she was trying to win over. By 2011 she had become a member of the Matua Mahasangha and touched the feet of 'boroma', Binapani Debi, the widow of P.R. Thakur. But though she was in the UPA-II, she was unable to do anything about the CAA 2003. This was where the BJP came in, offering the CAA 2019 as the solution.

In 2019, the BJP stormed the Matua dominated seats. Even in 2021, out of the 77 seats that the BJP has won, 38 came from SC (reserved) constituencies. West Bengal has a total of 84 such SC constituencies. The Matua-dominated constituencies won by the BJP are Gazole in Malda, Krishnaganj, Ranaghat (South), Ranaghat (North-East), Kalyani and Haringhata in Nadia and Bagda, Bongaon (North), Bongaon (South) and Gaighata in North 24 Parganas. The BJP has also won a significant number of the Rajbanshi dominated seats in North Bengal. But in the Dalit and Adivasi areas of Jungle Mahal (Purulia, Jhargram, West Midnapore and parts of Bankura districts) the BJP was pushed back. A major factor was the same CAA. It was a double edged weapon. With elections being held in Assam as well as West Bengal, with a large number of Assamese Hindus in detention camps and identified as 'D' voters, it was clear to people wherever serious anti NTC, anti CAA campaigns had been carried out, that the CAA was being used as a selective weapon in the hands of

governments. People with government issued voter cards or other government documents could be told that these were not valid documents.

In this area, Adivasis were to turn against the BJP, among other reasons, because the Hindutva discourse attempts to swallow all religions originating within India into Hindutva. Adivasis are campaigning for a recognition of their Sarna Dharma. The effects of adivasis shifting their support from the BJP to TMC were first felt in February when BJP national president JP Nadda had to cancel a public meeting in Jhargram mainly due to a low turnout. In the 40 constituencies comprising Jungle Mahal, Santhals are the dominant community. Among the poorest people, they found the BJP utterly unresponsive to their needs. The BJP election campaign focusing on Hindutva and the talk of capturing Bengal could only alienate them. By contrast, again using her segment by segment top down populism, Mamata Banerjee approached the adivasis with a number of things on offer. The Duare Sarkar [government at the doorsteps] programme, which was a show of government going to localities, taking up complaints, resolving the simpler ones quickly, brought gains. So did actions like setting up the Tribal Sahitya Akademi, etc.

The Collapse of the Left

If all the foregoing explains why the BJP ultimately failed and why the TMC succeeded, what is not explained is why the left has been wiped out. The CPI(M) has not yet come out with any elaborate, sober assessment of why their party has shrunk to a skeleton. In 2020 the CPI(M) had 1,60,485 members in West Bengal. In 2017 (the latest figures we could obtain), DYFI membership had gone down from 85 lakh (2010) to 40 lakh. One report puts the CITU membership at 15 lakh or so in 2019. One could go on and list the All India Kisan Sabha, Ganatantrik Mahila Samity (AIDWA in West Bengal), the Students Federation of India, along with the smaller Left Front parties and their own trade unions, peasant organisations, women's organisations, student organisations and the rest. The four Left Front parties polled 3,400, 984 votes across West Bengal. Which would suggest that beyond core groups—members of parties and close/leading members of some of the mass organisations, few others voted for them.

The simplest explanation is that the polls had been turned into a binary between the TMC and the BJP. Certainly this was true, but this does not explain why it could happen. This calls for looking again at the decline of the CPI(M) over the years first. When in 2007 the violence erupted over Nandigram, veteran CPI(M) member, economist, former Finance Minister of West Bengal, Ashok Mitra wrote a widely circulated article. In it he stressed that by 2007: "90% of its members have joined after 1977, 70% after 1991. They do not know the history of sacrifices of the party. To them ideological commitment to revolution and socialism is simply a fading folktale. As the new ideology is development, many of them are associated with the party in the search for personal development. They have come to take, not to give. They are learning different tricks so as to appropriate various privileges by aligning with the governing party. One efficient way to bag privileges is to flatter the masters. The party has turned into a wide open field of flatterers and court jesters. Moreover, there has been a rising dominance of 'anti-socials'." [19] We are not convinced that the CPI(M) was ever a revolutionary party. But at least, in 1964, when it was formed, it did have radical cadres in its ranks. By 2007, those members were few. What he went on to narrate was how even many seniors were motivated by power alone. And with a membership that had not known real struggles, that only launched state government protected strikes against the Centre, the CPI(M) for all its membership, mass organisation size, and so on, had been a bureaucratic structure in West Bengal that was propped up by governmental power and the negative image of Mamata Banerjee, as Ashok Mitra again recognized in his article.

This was backed up by the Stalinist perversion of vanguardism. As two of us wrote after the defeat of the Left in 2009 parliamentary elections:

A Leninist party is built as a revolutionary party. When Lenin talked about the vanguard, he stressed the need to unite the most militant and politically alert workers in the party. The concept of professional revolutionary meant a serious attempt to create working-class leadership within the party, formed of working-class militants so as to centralize and coordinate their efforts against the system. The idea was to give these activist-workers a respite from daily wage-work enabling the vanguard to be active on a more permanent basis. A study of Lenin's tactics shows that he was actually quite flexible. During the *Iskra* period he was urging the unity of revolutionary intellectuals with worker-militants. During the revolution of 1905 he wanted to open wide the doors of the party for militant workers. During the dispute over liquidationism he wanted to ensure the unity of the underground with the open movement, without letting go the gains of the past. He rejected both minority revolutionism and any idea of parliamentary socialism to be accomplished on behalf of the working class. The revolutionary organization has to help the working class understand collectively the need for a socialist transformation of society, for the socialist revolution. That is the dialectical relationship between the vanguard party and the mass self-organization of the working class.

Stalinist vanguardism, as we see practiced in India, asserts that the party has all the wisdom, and its task is to correctly transmit its ideas to the masses. And in bourgeois countries, whether in the developed or in the underdeveloped ones, the Stalinist parties have ceased to be revolutionary parties a very long time back. In the case of West Bengal, what we have seen since 1977 (we could argue the same for earlier years too, but leave them out here) was the Stalinist model, where the party organization controls the state, the mass organizations are mere transmission belts, and the party does not learn from the masses but merely seeks to direct them. [20]

So after 2011 the party organization was no longer able to control the state, and it was impossible for the CPI(M) to relaunch itself, after a 35 year hiatus, as a militant organisation. It seemed to be hoping that it would be seen as a default button as and when people got fed up with the TMC. What they did not realize is that the electoral gains cannot be seen, especially for a party claiming to be on the left, from such an angle.

It is worth noting that the TMC was the party that was able, not just in 2011 but in 2021, to project itself as the default button without really pushing strong politics against the BJP. The TMC election manifesto spared no words for the Assam NRC which has resulted in detention camps for so many people. Throughout the BJP era since 2014, the actual enrichment of India's top capitalists has gone hand in hand with a politics that pushes socio-economic issues to the sidelines. The TMC did not highlight issues that have been historically flagged by the left. It was content to campaign that the BJP was an outsiders' party (a reference to the Modi-Amit Shah- Adityanath led campaign).

But why did the Left Front, especially the CPI(M) fail? This has to do with failures at multiple levels. It has already been said that ever since 2011 some of their leaders have been imagining that 'people were wrong', someday 'people will recognise their errors', and will return to the CPI(M) as the default button. Beyond that we need to look at the 2021 campaign itself. When in 1989-90, our predecessor organization, the Inquilabi Communist Sangathan, called the BJP-RSS fascist, there were few takers. The analysis of communalism was still being carried out by the bulk of the left with the assumption that 'both communalisms are equally dangerous'. By 2019 that was no longer the case. Yet the way the terms fascist /fascism have been used leaves much to be desired. Here we cannot move into a detailed theoretical analysis. But we need to see that for the CPI(M)'s West Bengal leadership, fascist is a loosely used abuse. They insisted on the existence of an entity called Bijemool [i.e., that BJP and Trinamool are two peas in a pod] in their less formal propoganda. Instead of arguing that the TMC was not the fit party to resist fascism, that the left alone can fight fascism,

what their propaganda focused upon was the TMC alone. The BJP was mentioned mainly in passing. It is understandable that in a provincial election, where the party in government in that province is different from the BJP, any third force contesting will criticise the ruling party. But when the CPI(M), or many of its senior leaders regardless of the formal policy documents, focused primarily on the TMC, they were not simply committing a tactical error. From a Marxist point of view, they were turning their faces away from the party of India's dominant capitalist sectors, which is at the same time a party that uses huge political-ideological forces to mobilize masses to oppose any class struggle by workers and peasants. The election bulletin of Radical Socialist, while calling for a vote for the left, had stressed:

“For leftists, the axis of the electoral battles should be to make people aware why the BJP is not the alternative to the TMC.... Getting out on the streets to contest the TMC face to face, and alongside that to fight in a sustained manner against the policies of the centre, run by the BJP, will be effective in achieving that goal and will also be the real path to combat fascism.” [21]

A complete failure on the part of a good portion of the CPI(M) leadership was evident. For the urban middle class audience, and in these days, with the huge growth of whatsapp as a vehicle for political messaging, for people well beyond the urban middle class as well, another significant way in which the CPI(M) propaganda went was through armchair activists who specialized in spreading propaganda. Formally, the CPI(M) shrugged off responsibilities. Formally, it was not possible to check whether they were actually party members. On a few occasions indeed, sensible CPI(M) leaders and candidates, such as Aishe Ghosh, CPI(M) candidate from Jamuria and former JNUSU President, have taken firm objection to memes concentrating on ageism, looks, educational qualification etc of opponents. But in the cyberspace, what was circulating was mostly filth, which could only damage the image of the left. It is of no use to point to equal filth from the right, since we do not expect the same morality from the right. This alienated a section of supporters and leftists. If Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter are held to be things that go only to small groups [in my view a wrong assessment] one needs to look at major figures like Sujan Chakraborty or Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya, a lawyer, has become notorious for taking positions that seem perfectly aligned with the BJP campaign positions. Chakraborty, a major face on television in the campaign period debates, spent way more time attacking the TMC, while retaining token comments about the BJP.

Even more serious was the inability of the CPI(M) to react sharply to obvious abuse of power by the Central Government, before as well as after the elections. The worst case was when the Shitalkuchi firing took place. Instead of immediately recognising it as a use of force, and that under Election Commission control, to intensify communal polarization, the CPI(M) first took time, and then was not even certain whether to call it a conspiracy by the BJP and the institutions under its control, or a conspiracy by the TMC. This firing was actually to seal the fortunes of the BJP and the Left. Muslims from the fourth round of polling (the Shitalkuchi firing was early on during the fourth round) consolidated fully behind the TMC. The ISF votes mentioned earlier came mostly from the previous rounds.

Next we need to understand that the CPI(M) has refused to learn from its failures. In 2009 and 2011, apart from more general issues, the votes were also over Singur and Nandigram, the CPI(M)'s attempt to set up SEZs, take over peasant land, the violences over Singur and Nandigram unlike the silence with which they had previously managed to evict peasants in Rajarhat. Yet, the CPI(M) has never moved away from the position: ‘we were right. A conspiracy led to people misunderstanding us. Had Tata come in West Bengal would have seen tremendous economic growth.’

This goes back to 1991. When the USSR collapsed, the CPI(M) was the first of the Indian left parties, and till now the only one with such gay abandon, to turn to neoliberalism. Had it not been for that,

the CPI(M) would not have gone into an alliance with the Congress. If we look at the policies adopted by the BJP, we will find that only demonetization, carried out mainly to ensure winning the UP election, was unique to the BJP. From soft Hindutva to neoliberalism to patronage to Ambanis to the centralisation of the economy via the GST and the use of force and fraud in Kashmir, one has only to look into past history to find that the Congress was there, with many a backward glance perhaps, but ultimately pushing that line, since the late 1980s.

The Covid crisis and the lockdown needs to be seen as a continuation of the class struggle. In 2019, the CPI(M) was slow to pick up the struggle against NRC and CAA. In 2020 they were unable to recognize that the lockdown was a continuation of the class struggle. Today, the report card is out. Mukesh Ambani increased his wealth by 24% to \$83 billion in 2020, and Gautam Adani doubled his wealth \$32 billion. Meanwhile around 18 million salaried Indians lost their jobs in the four months of acute lock down. One study suggested that in 2020, the number of poor people, with income less than Rs 150 per day, increased from 60 million to 134 million, that is, an increase of 74 million. [22] But the CPI(M) could not develop any strategy that would link intervention in the Covid crisis with waging the class struggle on a countrywide plane. In 2020, it was content to highlight how much better the performance of the Kerala government, under CPI(M) leadership, was. That would have made sense only if linked to fighting against the lockdown policies. It is not a matter of whether the battles would all have been won. But the fight for higher taxes on the rich, for full ration as well as cash in hand (Universal Basic Income or some similar mode) for all affected by the lockdown, for investment in healthcare by the state, these should have been, not mere bullets in some vague manifesto, but fighting slogans around which to mobilise people the moment the lockdown started. Even today, after the West Bengal results, after seeing how the 8 phase election acted as a superspreader, the left could not call for a march on Delhi demanding the resignation of the BJP government for its role in disastrous handling of vaccination, oxygen supplies, and the rest.

For an Alternative Left?

Despite its shrunken and indeed skeletal look, one cannot ignore the CPI(M) when thinking of rebuilding a left. But it is clear that there must be sharp struggles within the CPI(M). For a long time, the West Bengal State Committee virtually called the shots at the all India level because the CPI(M) had a continuous run and the funds and benefits that came from West Bengal. Now ten years are gone, and a further five years when the Left is totally shut out of the West Bengal Assembly altogether. So other state units of the CPI(M) might have things to say. The youthful faces the CPI(M) had projected this time included some rotten apples, like Saptarshi Deb, but also a number of dynamic persons. The flaw was that it was highlighting middle class figures, rather than worker, peasant, adivasi, dalit youth. But all of these better type younger candidates would be able to make any change only if the political line of the CPI(M) shifts, not to a revolutionary left which we do not even expect, but at least to a militant reformist left.

The bulk of the far left in West Bengal had come together under an umbrella, with the slogan #NoVoteToBJP. Radical Socialist saw this as an erroneous strategy. Following the Popular Frontism which dates back to Dimitrov and for India to the Dutt-Bradley thesis, they campaigned for the candidate best suited to defeat the BJP. This seeming non-class campaign was a covert support to the TMC. Certain components actually made it clear that they stood for the TMC. Others kept it opaque. As a result, they remained silent over the TMC supremo's soft Hindutva, her reciting of Chandi, her retention of Twaha Siddiqui or Siddikullah Chowdhury, while breathing fire against the CPI(M) for allying with the 'fundamentalist' ISF. [Parenthetically, the CPI(M) was also to attack them in intemperate language, with the previously mentioned unofficial IT Cell bringing the gutter up into cyber space]. The primarily digital campaign, backed by a basically non-class on the ground

campaign, was little more than the fifth wheel in a car, though after the results were out many of the faces of the campaign claimed great role in the TMCs victory. This politics of what the more firm sections of the US left have repeatedly called 'lesser evil-ism', can only intensify. As Modi, unwilling to take the defeat lying down, attacks the West Bengal government, this left will find it necessary to uncritically support the TMC. That will likely intensify in 2024 for the parliamentary elections. What is needed instead is to build a class struggle left, which will of course pay attention to elections, but from a class independence standpoint, and which will make extra-parliamentary mass mobilizations their priority.

Kunal Chattopadhyay

Footnotes

[1] Zamindars were landlords with extensive power created by the Permanent Settlement of 1793.

[2] In 1964 the CPI had formally split, with several factors being involved—pro Moscow vs Pro China orientations, the question of electoral alliances (with progressives in Congress or with non Congress parties?), and the legacy of a lasting undercurrent of factionalism in the CPI all playing a role.

[3] The Congress had split between the supporters of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister, who had a majority of MPs, calling itself Congress (R) and the supports of the organization structure majority, called Congress (O).

[4] Explained in numerous articles. See Achin Vanaik, 'Revolutionaries and the Question of Electoral and Parliamentary Politics', *Radical* (English), Vol2, No.1, pp. 14-20; Kunal Chattopadhyay and Bodhisatwa Ray, 'Fighting the Elections in West Bengal in 2021: What perspective for revolutionaries?', *Radical* (English), Vol2, No.1, pp. 26-28; Kunal Chattopadhyay, 'Fascibad: Nirbachan, Pratirodh - Kichhu Proshno' [Fascism: elections, resistance—Some Questions], in *Radical Socialist, Paschimbanga Bidhansabha Nirbachan 2021*, Kolkata, March 2021.

[5] <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009085376629>

[6] All detailed voting data are from the ECI website.

[7] For the CAA and NRC, see Statement of Radical Socialist on the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), the Proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the Ongoing Protests Against Them, in <http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/statement-radical-socialist/882-statement-of-radical-socialist-on-the-citizen-amendment-act-cao-the-proposed-national-register-of-citizens-nrc-an-the-ongoing-protests-against-them> . See also Kunal Chattopadhyay and Bodhisatwa Ray, 'The Anti NRC, NPR, CAA Agitations: What is the Road Ahead?', *Radical*, vol1, No.2, June 2020, pp. 10-18.

[8] IANS, 'Rs 100 crore up in Bengal poll air', *The Statesman*, 21 April, 2021, <https://www.thestatesman.com/bengal/rs-100-crore-bengal-poll-air-1502963861.html>

[9] Nalini Singh, 'Opinion: The Cost of BJP's All-Or-Nothing Bengal Campaign', NDTV, 10 May 2021,

<https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/opinion-the-cost-of-bjps-all-or-nothing-bengal-campaign-2438583>

[10] This has included use of police in cases of all-India general strikes being called against the policies of the Central Government, revealing hereby that the TMC opposition to the BJP is not about rights of workers and peasants but about who wields power, who gets to the honey-pots.

[11] See report in the online portal The Wire.

<https://thewire.in/labour/trade-union-strike-449-arrested-in-bengal-tmc-muzzling-movement-says-left>

[12] Writing for the Radical Socialist website, Sushovan Dhar explained: "The agreement provides for an increase of Rs. 17.50 and Rs. 22.50 for the first year in Dooars/Terai region and Hill region respectively, followed by Rs. 10.00 each in next two years consecutively, thereby raising the daily wages of daily rated workers to Rs. 112.50, Rs. 122.50 & Rs. 132.50 from April 2014 to March 2017."

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/national-situation/692-plantation-workers-interests-sacrifice-d-to-keep-owners-happy>

As Dhar also remarked: "A few months ago, the owners/planters association indicated that they would raise the wages by only Rs. 37.00 in three years. The Government of West Bengal pushed the unions to accept that amount and promised that they would look into the minimum wages matter later. At that point all the unions jointly condemned the proposal and rejected it, leading to a failure of that round of negotiation. The present agreement, which is being termed a 'Political Victory' has been settled after a few months for exactly the same proposed amount."

[13] See Radical Socialist, Labour Law Reforms, Indian Capitalism and the Modi Government,

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/national-situation/739-labour-law-reforms-indian-capitalism-and-the-modi-government>

[14] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/big-breather-for-india-inc-as-govt-defers-implementation-of-labour-codes/articleshow/81774812.cms>

[15] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/big-breather-for-india-inc-as-govt-defers-implementation-of-labour-codes/articleshow/81774812.cms>

[16] For the Sachar Committee Report see

<http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/en/document/sachar-committee-report/complete-sachar-committee-reportenglish-2006-6655-kb>

[17] Maidul Islam and Subhashini Ali, 'Status of Muslims in West Bengal',

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Status-of-Muslims-in-West-Bengal/article14681976.ece>

[18] Christophe Jaffrelot and A. Kalaiyaran, 'Minority report: Polarisation in the Bengal polls could have repercussions for the state's politics',

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/minority-report-polarisation-in-the-bengal-polls-could-have-repercussions-for-the-states-politics-7275463/>

[19] It is also worth stressing that well known intellectuals got upset when this was pointed out.

One remarked on a facebook post I made that I was unable to understand the fundamentally bad politics of Siddiqui (as if that, even if true, excused the double standards of Bengali Hindu

savarnas—media persons, politicians, academics).

[20] This is the translation from Bengali of an article that appeared in Anandabazar Patrika on 14 November 2007. The translation was done by Debarshi Das of the Sanhati Collective, and is cited here from <https://mronline.org/2007/11/20/ashok-mitra-on-nandigram/>

[21] Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, 'Elections and the Left in India', International Socialist Review, Issue 66, <https://isreview.org/issue/66/elections-and-left-india>

[22] Koustav Das, 'Covid-19: Poverty Doubled in India in 2020. Will second wave make it worse?', <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/covid-19-poverty-doubled-in-india-in-2020-will-second-wave-make-it-worse-1793826-2021-04-22>