

# Who is to blame for the crisis of the Left in India?

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## **The Communist Part of India (Marxist)'s atrophy in West Bengal has dealt a body blow to the Left's influence in Indian politics**

In a 2010 interview to the *New Left Review*, Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm was asked to list the global events that have surprised him in the post-1991 period—which is when *The Age Of Extremes*, the last of his four-part magnum opus, ends. Among things such as the growing crisis of capitalism and the global economy's centre shifting from the north Atlantic regions, Hobsbawm talks about the imminent debacle of the three decade-long Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, led government in West Bengal. One might disagree with the importance Hobsbawm attached to the CPM losing power in West Bengal. However, it is definitely a watershed event as far the Left is concerned in India.

To be sure, the Indian Left is not confined to the CPM. A broad spectrum of parties and even non-party led struggles would fit in this category. However, it is also true that the fortunes of most of these have been tied to the performance of the CPM-led parliamentary Left. The Left's parliamentary decline in the recent period has adversely affected all of them. What explains this debacle?

The contradictions of caste politics and the weakening of trade unions in urban centres had severely squeezed the Left's support in many parts of India since the 1990s. Despite this, the CPM maintained its dominance in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. The biggest reason for a major decline in the Left's parliamentary fortunes is its collapse in West Bengal. Why did this happen?

Anybody interested in this question must read *Government As Practice: Democratic Left In A Transforming India* by Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, a professor of political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Bhattacharya's analysis is important because it tries to explain the Left's decline in the state as the result of a long-drawn process rather than the fallout of individual decisions or events.

Even after the Nandigram police firing, Nirupam Sen, a CPM politburo member and then industry minister of the state, maintained that there was no large-scale opposition to land acquisition in West Bengal. Was this just smugness? Bhattacharya does not think so. He argues that gradual churning in West Bengal's rural economy and society had led to contractors and middlemen gaining control of the CPM's rural organization. Their class interests were quite different from those of the rural poor. The former stood to gain from the boom in land acquisition for industrialization. The latter were anxious at the prospect of losing their sole source of livelihood and increasingly getting alienated due to the refusal of the local Left leadership to empathize with their concerns. The ground-based intelligence that the party leadership was getting from its cadres was simply wrong. There are multiple examples of this kind in Bhattacharya's book. All of them point to one thing. Those who were tasked with taking the Left's politics to the masses had little incentive to adhere to Left praxis.

Why could this not be arrested in time? In her book *Rebuilding The Left*, Chilean sociologist Marta Harnecker sees “hegemonist attitude” as one of the biggest reasons for the crisis of the Left. She describes this as a tendency to steamroll any opposition and sees this as a complete opposite of hegemony which refers to widespread support for somebody’s ideas. The West Bengal CPM leadership’s refusal to pay heed to the warnings of many fellow travellers on land acquisition-related discontent was a result of this hegemonist attitude. Harnecker’s views on political hegemony are worth reproducing: “Hegemony is not achieved once and for all. A constant process of renewal is necessary to keep it. Life goes on, new problems appear and with them new challenges. If the organisation is not capable of responding to these, it could lose its influence in the society.”

If the CPM is to make a comeback, it will have to regain its lost hegemony in the state. This requires a self-realization of what led to its loss in the first place. As the party prepares for its triennial congress next year, there does not seem to be any discussion on these lines. Instead, there is a near vertical split on the farcical question of whether or not the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is fascist, which can then be used to stitch together an alliance with the Congress in West Bengal. The CPM lost the primary opposition status to the Congress after allying with it in the 2016 assembly election.

In 1996, the CPM did not allow Jyoti Basu to become the prime minister of India. Basu termed it a historic blunder. Recently, the CPM did not allow its general secretary, Sitaram Yechury, to get re-elected to the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal on Congress support. Many have termed this a second historic blunder. The CPM won two assembly elections in West Bengal after Basu was not allowed to become prime minister. It has been continuously losing ground in the state since 2008, despite Yechury being in the Rajya Sabha all this while. None of these had any impact on the party’s mass support in its strongest bastion.

Not many people talk about the real historic blunder, though. The person who told Hobsbawm about the left’s imminent debacle a year before the 2011 West Bengal assembly election was Prakash Karat, then general secretary of the party. That he and the entire national leadership of the party could not act in time to salvage the situation created by the West Bengal leadership is the ultimate sin in the history of the Left’s engagement with democracy in India.

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\* Live Mint:

<http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/AlQIVJ8thUoei3LSTiL7TP/Who-is-to-blame-for-the-crisis-of-the-Left-in-India.html>