

India: How the CPI(M) Itself Is a 'Principal Contradiction'

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The Left in Tripura lacked the political imagination to build a strategy against the BJP's campaign. Worse, it did not develop the political conversations required to alleviate social tensions.

Of course the Communist Party of India (Marxist) will not bend. It has not been routed, it will have us believe. And why not? The Front it led has secured 44% of the popular vote – seven percentage points less than its 2013 score. On the other hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which could manage to win less than 2% of the votes in 2013, is all set to rule Tripura by harvesting over 51% of the popular mandate for the alliance it has formed. The seven percentage point difference in vote share has resulted in a tremendous swing in seats – 43 to BJP+ and 16 to the Left, actually the CPM.

It's not surprising, in the Indian polling system, for a small swing in vote percentage to produce wonders for one party while ruining the other. The Left Front in West Bengal remained in power for three and a half decades by winning about 50% of the votes. But, in 2011, its vote share came down to 42%, and the Trinamool Congress combine took away about 50% to marginalise the Left Front in terms of seat share (60 out of 294). Then too, the CPI(M) boasted about its high share of votes; but the decline that manifested itself in 2011 gained quick momentum to leave the Front –both in terms of vote share and seat share – gasping for breath. If the past is a guide, and unless the CPI(M) starts to think politically, the trend in Tripura, in all likelihood, is going to follow the West Bengal path.

The BJP in Tripura – despite manoeuvring to win over the entire Congress vote bank, sending the latter to almost a state of nothingness – is still, in terms of vote share, one percentage point less than the CPI(M). But whatever Prakash Karat and his colleagues believe, the BJP and the Congress are clearly not the same in content, and the BJP will not leave any stone – sociopolitical, bureaucratic, muscular – unturned to see to the CPI(M)'s demise. And the sort of politics the CPI(M) has reduced itself to is far too sickly to resist the onslaught.

Clearly, it is the en masse switchover of Congress voters on which the BJP has made its castle. Indeed, except in 1977, when its vote share went down to 18%, the Congress had managed to maintain a vote bank in Tripura of over 30% (in 2013 it was 37%). But the collapse of the Congress to 1.5% of the vote share is a product of not only the weakness of the party, but also the fertile terrain the CPI(M)'s politics in the state created for the BJP.

For most of the 25 years it was in power, the CPI(M) banked upon the political agenda of “good governance”, which it delivered on rather successfully.

In 2014, I had an opportunity to travel across the length of the state, and have seen for myself how the Left Front had managed to put an end to the terrible political violence that used to convulse the state. The path it took to bring peace was also quite different from many other state governments, namely Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and also West Bengal. It attempted to resolve the tribal-non-

tribal conflict by means of welfare measures – distribution of land, rehabilitation, reversal of land alienation, on one hand and redistributive social policies, such as food security, employment guarantee, and other social security schemes, expansion of education and health services, and so on, on the other.

The state under Left rule had invested substantially in the social sector, partly as a result of which it has had a high rate of economic growth. But what was perhaps lacking in the whole practice was politics. The elements of conflict between the tribals and non-tribals drew not so much on economic life as it did from the sociopolitical spectrum. That is why, the gradual upliftment in the standard of living and some representation in the ruling ranks, brought both an enhanced tribal aspiration and a sense of deprivation.

Through good governance, it was possible to usher in some improvement in the lives of the tribals, but it was far too inadequate to reverse the historically built-up power structure that gave the Bengali Hindus dominance over the tribal peoples, who once formed two-thirds of the population but are now reduced to a third, who have lost land, and have felt culturally threatened. Social sector investment was only one solution to the problem, but it required much more to restore in the tribal mind a world they would feel secure in.

With increased levels of literacy and the spread of educational opportunities, the aspiration of the tribals, particularly the youth, increased manifold. Tripura in terms of literacy achievement is very close to Kerala; in fact, the literacy rate among the tribals of Tripura is higher than that of their Kerala counterparts. The change in literacy status raised expectations of better employment opportunities. But within the given framework of political economy it was not possible for any government – left or right – to meet those aspirations.

Here, as in West Bengal, the Left appeared to be short on imagination. It could neither read the minds of the aspirational youth, nor could it develop a language which they could comprehend. The reason why the Left could not develop for itself a receptive vocabulary lies perhaps in its uninterrupted and almost unchallenged electoral success, which was not unrelated to an expansionist line of politics – the shrinking of opposition space, by various means, including development rhetoric. It is true that the Tripura Left had not followed its West Bengal big-brother's line of "party society", but it did make hegemony possible through bureaucratic intervention.

Social sector improvement measures were largely carried out through a robust bureaucratic mechanism – there was little or no participatory equality. The middle-level bureaucracy of the state largely consisted of Bengali Hindus, who did not necessarily nurture hatred for the tribals in their minds. But the absence of politics with substance to change the social psyche and power balance allowed bureaucratic habits to continue. The kind of demand for, and habit of attracting, "respect" that is built in the bureaucracy – even elected representatives address block development officers as "Sir" – not only had its reflection in the relationship between bureaucrats and people, but also among higher officials and their subordinates, in many cases who happened to be tribal.

Aside from this, the Bengali Hindu mind suffered from some kind of superiority complex, which resulted in their explicitly favouring "Bengali" culture – with flamboyant exhibitions of the remnants of Bengal renaissance – over the tribal ones. In a school I visited, the local residents, who belonged to a tribal community, complained to me, "Look, we have been asking the headmaster for several years to display on the walls a photograph of [the late] Dasarath Dev [CPI-M leader and ex-chief minister]; but, he is not listening to us; what is the problem in placing Dasarath Dev beside Vidyasagar, Rabindranath, and Vivekananda?"

It is no surprise that the BJP has made full use of the perceived deprivation and subordination of the

tribals. In addition, it has managed to maneuver a section of Bengali Hindus, who, owing to their social roots, have a natural inclination towards a communal approach. I have heard many Bengali Hindus accusing the CPI(M) of “appeasing” the Muslims and tribals: *“Manikbabu bhalo lok, kintu or party to Musalman aar adivasider toshan kare”*. So, for the CPI(M) it was a Catch-22 situation: tribals suspected it to be a party of the Bengali Hindus, and a section of Bengali Hindus accused it of favouring the tribals and Muslims.

In the final analysis, the CPI(M) did not try to develop the kind of political conversations required to alleviate social tensions. Instead of expanding the opportunities for participation based on the principles of equality in human status, it tended to extract participation through bureaucratic governance. That the BJP carries an armoury that contains all sorts of immoral, uncivil, and anti-humanitarian weapons should not be unknown to the CPI(M).

Clearly, the party lacked the political imagination to build a strategy against the BJP’s campaign. It failed to resolve one of the major contradictions – the insular social tension between tribals and non-tribals that is vindicated by the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura (IPFT) garnering huge support from the tribal masses (it has won eight out of nine contested seats). But at the root of the CPI(M)’s defeat lies the “principal contradiction” – that the party invoked the slogan of “good governance” bereft of politics as championed by the World Bank, instead of committing itself politically to addressing the concerns of the state’s peoples.

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