

Elections, *Jatra* Style, in West Bengal

A total absence of a long-term strategy has marked not only the land reforms programme of the Left Front government of West Bengal, but also crucial spheres like education and health. However, the Bengali electorate has no option but to accept the Communist Party of India (Marxist) as something better than the others, leaving the Left Front's vote bank intact.

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In West Bengal's assembly elections, foreplay seems to be more important than the actual act. More than the polls and their results, it is the pre-poll excitement that stimulates the mind of the Bengali electorate. To them, the climax – or the anti-climax (?) – is a foregone conclusion. Like the audience of the popular Bengali folk theatre *jatra*, they know who will be the winner. Yet, they participate with gusto in the public meetings, follow with avid interest every bit of intrigue that is hatched by political rivals, vicariously enjoy the gossip about amorous escapades, or financial scams of sitting MLAs, and lap up all the sensational news (both authentic and fictitious) dished up by the newspapers. Added to this, of course, is the excitement of watching the rise in the murder graph – political workers and polling agents getting killed in inter-party clashes on the eve of the election. The *jatra* thus gets re-enacted in the socio-political stage of West Bengal during every election with all the ingredients of a tragi-comic opera. We have sleaze, sex and violence – with a bit of political rhetoric thrown in. What more do we need for a perfect electoral ad-campaign?

Is there any difference this time? There are a few extra kicks. The Election Commission, for instance, enthused by the reputation that it earned by ensuring “free and fair” polls in Bihar, has arrived in West Bengal in all fanfare. During a recent clean-up operation, its observers discovered 13,00,000 false names in the list of voters, and struck them off (thus depriving the cadres of the various political parties of their hitherto enjoyed privilege of casting votes in their names); ordered the suspension

of local government officials who had either connived at the compilation of such false names, or ignored the Election Commission's instructions asking them to delete them; directed its chief electoral officer in West Bengal to take immediate legal action against those who were intimidating voters; and asked the state government to apprehend candidates against whom non-bailable arrest warrants had been pending for years. While these steps (if implemented) will affect all the political parties in West Bengal (since their leaders and cadres had been indulging in such practices for years), curiously enough it was the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the CPI(M), which was the first to express its reaction in a rather ludicrous fashion. The party's state secretary Anil Biswas first welcomed the Election Commission's observers, but then turned hostile when their findings revealed that it was his party cadres, more than others, who had been violating the norms set by the commission. He then came out with threats against the observers, and blamed them for taking media people along with them during their visits to the interior villages (from where the reporters exposed the fraud carried out all these years in the compilation of voters' lists). He went to the extent of accusing the commission's observers of being agents of the opposition. The party's central leadership soon reined in Biswas – who has the reputation of putting his foot in his mouth whenever speaking on issues about which he has no clue. In fact, Biswas had no reasons to lose his cool. The loss of his constituency of bogus voters, and the rigorous supervision by the Election Commission may cost the CPI(M) a few votes here and there this time. But even if it ends up with

a reduced number of seats in the Assembly, this is not likely to affect its position as the single largest party and the head of the Left Front, which appears to be destined for victory again.

Monotony of Left Monopoly

Political observers are bewildered and bored by the continuance of the Left Front in power in West Bengal for almost three decades, despite economic stagnation and authoritarian highhandedness of the CPI(M) leaders and cadres, which seem to have made them unpopular among large sections of the people – judging by newspaper reports. There is one interesting theory which speculates that because of increased “informalisation of the economy”, large segments of the electorate who work in the informal sector have to depend on the CPI(M) for protection and continuation in their jobs, and therefore vote for it. Along with this, its strong political organisation with a wide network has helped the CPI(M) to maintain a firm grip on the cadres as well as the voters (Abhirup Sarkar, ‘Political Economy of West Bengal’, *EPW*, January 28, 2006). While valid to some extent, these two factors alone however cannot explain the phenomenon. We should remember that the employees of the formal sector too have a major stake in the CPI(M). Some 30,00,000 industrial workers are organised in its trade union front, the centre of Indian Trade Unions. The All Bengal Teachers' Association, the West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association and the West Bengal Government College Teachers' Association dominate the teaching profession in the state. The coordination committee of government employees is one of the biggest trade union bodies in the state sector. Over the years, thanks to the Left Front government, employees of this vast organised sector have gained immensely in terms of wages, housing facilities, and other perks and pecuniary benefits. They form a solid base for the CPI(M)'s electoral success. Besides, we should not forget the Krishak Sabha, the peasants' wing of the party, which boasts of a membership of 1.4 crore, many among whom have benefited from land reforms, panchayati system, and other socio-political changes in the countryside. These beneficiaries have today become loyal party bosses in their local areas, risen to positions of power, and control every aspect of rural life. No farmer or peasant dare

defy their diktats, since without their help and protection they can never maintain their land and livelihood.

The other factor that has gone in favour of the CPI(M) is the absence of an effective Opposition which has failed to break its monotonous monopoly of the last three decades. Apart from remaining divided, the anti-Left political parties have neither any leader worth the name nor any organisation capable of competing with the mass fronts of the Left parties. The state Congress is a body of squabbling leaders and disheartened ranks. The main Opposition party, the Trinamul Congress, is headed by Mamata Banerjee, part of a new breed of female politicians (e.g. Uma Bharti and Mayawati), who imitate their male counterparts by attracting the poor with populist slogans, and demonstrate their muscle power with the help of the lumpen proletariat. Like the other two, Mamata also has a problem with her ego that has led to the departure of many of her important associates from her party, and rising disillusionment among her followers. Eager to avoid a split in the anti-Left votes, Mamata is today keen on having an alliance with the Congress. The latter however does not want to see its secular image tarnished by open association with a party (Trinamul) that is aligned to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition. But united in their hostility towards the CPI(M), some among both these parties are trying to come to a secret agreement under which they will refrain from putting candidates against each other, and instead support one against the CPI(M). Given the bad blood prevailing between some of the Congress leaders of the state and those of the Trinamul (a breakaway faction from the parent Congress), such an arrangement may not work out at the end.

The only problem that upsets the poor public image of the CPI(M) is a spurt in the activities of the armed Naxalites, who after a long lull have resurfaced in the tribal-dominated West Bengal districts bordering Jharkhand. They are rallying the rural poor here who have been left out all these years from the Left Front government's programmes of land reform, primary education and healthcare. They are targeting the police which had acquired notoriety in these areas for their exploitation and oppression of the tribal poor. The Left Front administration till now has been treating it as a law and order problem by unleashing the police on the Naxalite

cadres and followers, many among whom have been arrested and are being tortured in police custody. At the political level, however—for a change—even while railing against the Naxalites, the usually bumptious CPI(M) state secretary Anil Biswas, at a recent public meeting in Krishnagar, has betrayed a rare sense of modesty by acknowledging his government's failure: "Even after 29 years of Left Front rule, many people in Bengal don't have enough food and clothes... We have problems in dealing with poverty. Otherwise, the Maoists would not have made inroads. Our party will have to take up this challenge in the coming days" (*The Telegraph*, February 27, 2006).

To come back to the Naxalites in West Bengal, judging by their recent actions, they do not seem to hold out any viable alternative. Instead of formulating a comprehensive strategy to attract the vast sections of the masses, they seem to be fast degenerating into the old practice of what can be facetiously described as "revolution through revenge" – or the habit of killing their political rivals (as evident from a gruesome incident of burning to death a local CPI(M) leader and his wife in a village in Purulia sometime ago). Among former Naxalite leaders, the veteran of the 1970s, Ashim Chatterjee is snuggling up to the Congress, begging support from it to stand in the coming elections! Nothing more could illustrate the bankruptcy of the previous generation of communist radicals. They have little to offer by way of hope or change. None of the opponents of the CPI(M)-led Left Front has been able to come out till now with an alternative programme that would inspire confidence among those sections of the electorate who are disillusioned with some of the recent economic policies of the government (e.g. transfer of huge chunks of agricultural land to industrial estates and entertainment parks), as well as protect those who are daily victims of the heavy-handed behaviour of the local CPI(M) dons.

No immediate possibility of a challenge to the CPI(M) from within the Left – a challenge that would overturn its present pro-business house policies and strong arm politics in civil society in favour of a more egalitarian and democratic order – is discernible. Non-Left alternatives are not popular in West Bengal, where the BJP, despite gaining foothold in certain areas, still remains a pariah among large sections of the population. Mandalisation did not inspire any upsurge among the OBCs in

the shape of separate organisations or parties since their leaders – along with dalits – were already coopted by the CPI(M) in panchayats and other positions of power. Tribal based protests have usually taken the path of non-parliamentary agitations (e.g. in north eastern Bengal, or the Maoist insurgency in the west). One such major movement – led by Subhash Ghising in Darjeeling for a Gurkha homeland – has been sufficiently neutralised by the Left Front government by a judicious mixture of political lollipops to placate the ego of Ghising, and enough opportunities to allow him and his party to make money. As for the Bengali middle classes, although at times they are enraged by CPI(M)'s strong arm tactics, and suffer from impotent anger and helplessness, by and large they seem to have reconciled themselves to the state of affairs. At one time they toyed with the idea of propping up Mamata Banerjee as their leader; but watching the lady's antics they are no longer sure whether West Bengal under her would be any better than the CPI(M) regime.

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's Perestroika

It is in this drab scenario that the CPI(M) is trying to replace some of the dilapidated sets of the election *jatra* with a few new props. The slogans of the past, lauding Operation Barga, land redistribution and literacy campaign, have lost much of their sheen, what with the well-publicised data and living experience of economic stagnation and high school drop-out rates in the rural areas. Chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has therefore come up with the new jingle: "Agriculture is our base, industry our future." Zipping across the state, he is laying foundation stones for new townships, industrial units, food parks, shopping malls, IT centres and catering training institutes after taking over agricultural plots from small farmers and landholders. In exchange, the latter are asked to be content with the little amount of money that they receive as compensation, and cheer up for the future when the unskilled among them are supposed to get jobs in the construction sites of these projects, and the trained to be employed there after their completion. Little consolation for these newly created landless, and the backlog of 70,00,000 people who are already registered as unemployed in the state!

But has Buddhadeb Bhattacharya any option? The plots which his government

is gobbling up to set up industrial estates are mainly concentrated in Kolkata's neighbouring district of 24-Parganas – where according to some estimates, due to fragmentation and lack of adequate resources, the owners of these small plots were in any case ready to dispose of them through distress sale. Justifying the buying up of their land by the government to permit the Indonesian Salim group to set up projects there, the CPI(M) peasant leader Benoy Konar, also a member of the party's central committee, wrote recently in his party journal: "To keep more than 60 per cent of the population permanently in backward, narrow and scattered agricultural production does in no way help towards realising socialism" (*People's Democracy*, November 6, 2005). Fine words! But then, why did his party and government fail to envisage this future when back in 1977 they rode to power on the promise of giving land to the landless – without building up an infrastructure of cooperative farming, input supply, proper distributive network and other facilities that could have emancipated these poor agriculturalists from their tiny little cells of "narrow and scattered agricultural production?"

It is this total lack of a long-term strategy that has marked, not only the land reforms programme of the Left Front government of West Bengal, but also policies regarding crucial spheres like education and health. Instead of revamping the teaching and medical institutions and making them professionally efficient and more accessible to the common people, the Left government allowed them to be taken over by their trade unions, which have converted them into disreputable centres of corruption and nepotism. The employees – whether teachers or doctors – are well-paid by the government and well-protected by their trade unions. But despite such privileges enjoyed by these Bengali middle class professionals, the majority of the teachers hardly attend schools and colleges, and the doctors rarely turn up at the hospitals and primary health centres. They earn more than their wages from the private tuitions and medical practices that they carry out on the sly. After all these years – maybe under tremendous public pressure from his disgruntled middle class constituency – Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is today trying to cleanse these Augean stables. He has reprimanded in public the ministers in charge of education and health for their failures, and as a first step, has denied candidature in the coming election to the

deadwood in the education ministry – old gasbags like Satyasadhan Chakravarty and Kanti Biswas. While this might please the Bengali middle class voters who, tired of the corruption and inefficiency in the educational institutions, had been baying for the blood of these ministers, one is not sure whether a mere change of guard at the top would purge the system of the corruption and ineptitude that had bred during the last three decades of perverse trade unionism.

Meanwhile, the Left Front vote bank remains stable – with the Bengali electorate left with no option but to

accept the CPI(M) as something better than others (the Bengali term 'monder bhalo' being used to express the mood of helplessness), and their upwardly mobile children looking forward to prospects of highly paid berths in the new establishments that are coming up under the Leftist regime. "It is the plight of the snake which chose the frog for its meal", said one street wag in Kolkata, adding: "The CPI(M) is stuck in our gullet. We can neither swallow it, nor disgorge it." **EW**

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