

PROPOSAL

LONG MARCH OR GARDEN PATH?

The Left Front's First Term in West Bengal (1971-1982)

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The Left Front was set up as the repressive climate of the Emergency was relaxed in January 1977. The six founding parties of the Left Front, i.e. the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI(M), the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the Biplabi Bangla Congress (BBC), articulated a common programme. This Left Front contested the Lok Sabha election in an electoral understanding together with the Janata Party and won most of the seats it contested. Ahead of the subsequent June 1977 West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections, seat-sharing talks between the Left Front and the Janata Party broke down. The Left Front had offered the Janata Party 56 percent of the seats and the post as Chief Minister to JP leader Prafulla Chandra Sen, but JP insisted on 70 percent of the seats. The Left Front thus opted to contest the elections on its own. The seat-sharing within the Left Front was based on the "Promode Formula", named after the CPI(M) State Committee Secretary Promode Dasgupta. Under the Promode Formula the party with the highest share of votes in a constituency would continue to field candidates there, under its own election symbol and manifesto. CPI(M) contested 224 seats, AIFB 36, RSP 23, MFB 3, RCPI 4 and BBC 2. The Left Front won the election, winning 231 out of the 294 seats. CPI(M) won 178 seats, AIFB 25, RSP 20, MFB 3, RCPI 3 and 1 independent. AIFB and RSP won significant chunks of seats in northern Bengal. The combined Left Front vote was 6,568,999 votes (45.8 percent of the votes cast in the state). The electoral result came as a surprise to the Left Front itself, as it had offered 52 percent of the seats in the pre-electoral seat sharing talks with the Janata Party. Over the years, the Left Front, though joined by the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1982, came increasingly to be controlled and micro-managed by the CPI(M), so much so that towards the end of its rule, Left Front and the CPI(M) had almost become synonymous in common use. However, the end of its rule did not

come soon. Once it achieved its unexpected victory in 1977, the Left Front stayed in power for the next 34 years.

Till 2011, therefore, West Bengal had the longest ruling democratically elected Communist government in world history. Since 1977 the Communists governed a population larger than that of most western democracies. Its approximately 80 million people¹ re-elected the Communists repeatedly, indicating a continuing popularity and longevity not found by Marxists in any other democracy. The Communist electoral victory in one of India's most industrialized (at the time of independence) and strategically important states predictably created considerable interest and controversy over its performance in office. This performance was expressed in the first five years mainly through rural development initiatives.

Though development policy implementation was not the only Left Front endeavour, it was the most critical in providing a working example for the rest of India, and in consolidating Communist power. Electorally the rural areas with 74 percent of the state population would be critical in maintaining Communist influence. For this reason rural development had priority over urban industrial development in determining the success of the Left Front government. It was also the area where the Communists had greatest constitutional authority as agrarian reform fell largely within state jurisdiction. Rural development will therefore take up most of the present work, with industrial and trade union policies providing analogous urban examples. Since the present study will be concerned as far as possible with the Left Front's first term in government (1977-1982), special attention will be given to Operation Barga of 1977 and the panchayat elections of 1978. Land reform and decentralisation of administration were, indeed, the two key priorities in the first term. On 29 September 1977 the West Bengal Land (Amendment) Bill was passed. Through Operation Barga, in which share-croppers were given inheritable rights on lands they tilled, 1.1 million acres of land was distributed amongst 1.4 million share-croppers.² On 4 June 1978 three-tier panchayat local bodies were elected across the state, elections in which the

¹ The population in 2001 according to *Census 2001*, http://www.jsk.gov.in/projection_report_December2006.pdf

² Bidyut Chakraborty, *Left Radicalism in India*, Routledge, 2014, p. 107

Left Front won a landslide victory.³ Some 800,000 acres of land were distributed to 1.5 million heads of households between 1978 and 1982.⁴

Administrative reforms will also be covered to indicate the policy instruments available to the Left Front for reform implementation. The emphasis is on development policies that might be attempted by any provincial Third World government trying to alter socioeconomic conditions in favour of the lower classes.

The task facing the Left Front government on assuming office in 1977 was fraught with difficulties, despite its massive majority in the Legislative Assembly. The problems posed by the transition to socialism in the conditions of West Bengal were hardly amenable to easy solutions. The United Fronts of the late 1960s, under pressure from the Maoist left, had attempted rapid radical change only to be brutally repressed. This radical activity helped gain the CPI(M) a larger base, but the party's inability to stand up to state repression exposed its weakness in the face of a dictatorial government. Only the return of democracy after the Emergency enabled the CPI(M) to show that its popular following had been enhanced during the years of "semi-fascist terror".

Though the central Janata government formed in 1977 was not hostile to the Left Front, it could hardly be expected to countenance revolutionary change in a state government, nor was a successful revolution possible in one province alone. Having won the election, the Left Front could use its power either for radical polarization of class forces, or for a more gradual incremental change designed to give longevity to the government: a longevity sufficient for its base to survive till revolutionary conditions in the rest of India caught up with West Bengal. These revolutionary conditions however would likely take decades to come if they came at all. A state government intent on remaining in power for decades could hardly be expected to keep up a tempo of popular revolutionary fervour.

Surprisingly, and as we have already observed, even the Communists never expected to win all but sixty-three of the 293 assembly seats when they ran for election in 1977. They had gone to great lengths to form a seat adjustment with the non-Communist Janata Party then ruling the

³ Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, "Thirty Years of left Front Government in West Bengal", *People's Democracy*, Vol. XXXI, No. 25, June 24, 2007; http://archives.peoplesdemocracy.in/2007/0624/06242007_buddhadev.htm

⁴ Kheya Bag, "Red Bengal's Rise and Fall", *New Left Review*, 70, Jul-Aug 2017; <https://newleftreview.org/II/70/kheya-bag-red-bengal-s-rise-and-fall>

central government, but when rebuffed contested on their own and won a landslide victory. Their unexpected victory left them without an articulated strategy for directing their new-found power. However, their *ad hoc* reactions to problems indicated where their interests lay and the groups they were most oriented to promoting. It was these policies which insured their popularity and consolidated their base in the state.

It was Jyoti Basu, a man known for his precision of articulation, who, in holding up West Bengal as an example for the rest of India, made the most revealing statement about Left Front government policy in 1985:

The Left Front Government in the State of West Bengal has limited powers. It has to operate within a capitalist feudal economy. The Constitution, contrary to federal principles, does not provide for the needed powers for the States and we suffer from a special disability because the Union Government is ill disposed towards our Government. In such a situation, we have been explaining to the people why we cannot bring about fundamental changes even though the ideology and character of our Government are different from those that characterise the Government at the Centre. But we do hold that by forming the Government through elections it is possible for us to rule in a manner which is distinctly better and more democratic than the way followed by the Congress party at the Centre and in many other States. It is also possible to give relief to the people, particularly the deprived sections, through the minimum programme adopted by the Left Front. We have been attempting to do so by motivating the people and enlisting their support and sympathy. Our objective is to raise their political consciousness along with giving them relief so that they can distinguish between truth and falsehood and friends and enemies, and realise the alternative path which will free them from the shackles of Capitalism and Feudalism and usher in a new modern progressive society. This is a difficult task and we have to traverse a long path. But we visualise success in our objective when large masses all over India will be imbued with the correct political consciousness and free themselves from *bourgeois* influence and ideology, particularly the working masses. They will arrive at the truth through experience and continuous struggles. The left and democratic State Governments can help and expedite this process even with their limited powers. It is with such a perspective and objective that we are functioning in West Bengal.⁵

⁵ Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal, *Left Front Government's Industrial Policy: Some Aspects* (Calcutta: Information and Cultural Affairs Department, 1985), p. 5.

This Communist transitional strategy takes place in two stages. The first stage would create governments at the state level opposed to the ruling Congress, breaking its virtual monopoly of power, and enabling other popular parties including the Communists to make inroads. In such fluid conditions the Communists could eventually attain a dominant position in coalition governments at the state level. When dominance was achieved at a national level, the Communist takeover would be complete.

The first stage involving Communist participation in state governments would attempt reforms only as a means of developing a Communist political base. In its political practice, however, the reforms would not be much different from what Social Democratic parties might be expected to deliver, but which the establishment parties had proved unable or unwilling to implement. Therefore, the Communist state governments could not be expected to implement an immediate revolutionary programme. Rather their policy implementation could only be considered on the basis of (1) whether it used all avenues for reform available within the constitutional system, and (2) whether these reforms contained a potential for further radicalization and expansion of the Communist movement towards the ultimate goal of a Communist revolution. A failure to implement reforms could be due to the constitutional system's allowing insufficient scope for reform along lines conducive to Communist growth, or because of inadequacies with Communist policy implementation. The final possibility is that while the reforms may succeed in their immediate objectives, they create interests inimical to more radical alternatives and supportive of a new status quo. This paper hopes to argue that while there was sufficient scope within the Indian constitution for reforms conducive to Communist growth in a revolutionary direction, these reforms were not undertaken. Furthermore what reforms were implemented furthered class and group interests hostile to more radical change, making the development of a revolutionary conjuncture less likely. As a result, reforms ground to a halt, and their continued stay in office became counterproductive from a revolutionary Communist viewpoint, but helpful to the establishment they aimed at overthrowing.

The Communist state government had limited jurisdiction over many institutions and departments, having to operate within the constitutional constraints of the central government, which had the power to remove it from office by Presidential decree. With these limitations in mind, the policy implementation of the Left Front government may be analysed to determine its

success in bringing about social and economic change, and to indicate groups that benefited from these reforms. Their electoral success was due to following policies that promoted rural middle- and upper-class interests, while distributing palliatives to the lower classes. In the urban areas the interests of the government clerical staff were promoted, as well as of those corporations still willing to invest in the state. The industrial and rural working class received few if any benefits from Left Front rule, and might have been better off had the Communists remained in opposition where they could have led strikes in pursuit of wage demands.

It will be argued that the Left Front failed, not primarily because of the limitations on its power and resources, but because it did not make appropriate use of the powers and resources that it had at its disposal. Rather than promoting the interests of the rural and urban lower classes, it gave primacy to the traditional rural and urban middle-class base of the Communist movement, which ultimately proved an obstacle to the further advancement both of lower-class interests, and those of the revolutionary Communist movement as a whole. The ruling CPI(M) which had been founded as a revolutionary alternative to the old “revisionist” Communist Party, became through its experience in office, no different from its parent party. It thus ceased to be revolutionary in its practice, and even to call it reformist would be overstating its achievements in office. The rural and urban vested interests which the Left Front promoted eventually made further change in both reformist and revolutionary directions more difficult, as these interests became more firmly entrenched than ever, and opposed to any change in the status quo which would threaten the newly created privileges the Left Front provided them with. While this distribution of patronage enabled the Communists to be an electoral success, it ultimately proved inimical to the advancement of revolutionary communism (an impasse out of which it is unlikely to emerge in the foreseeable future, even in its position now as opposition). By promoting various propertied class interests, it gave these groups a stake in the status quo, and made them more hostile to reforms that would benefit the society as a whole. These classes transformed from being the traditional advocates of reform, to being its most vociferous opponents.

Among the non-partisan voices, there is general consensus about this. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, prophetically analysing the initial electoral losses of the Left Front in 2008, through the theoretical optic of ‘party-society’, opined: “The preponderance of the party over the social space, the transformation of the party from a hegemonic force into a violative one and ultimately

the ruptures in the ‘party-society’ have all gone on to loosen the dominance of the Left Front in West Bengal.”⁶ He has further expanded in his 2016 book that the CPI(M) was so caught up in the process of preserving power that it refused to reinvent a process of change that came about after the reforms it initiated in the 1980s. Rather than utilising the quotidian nature of its engagement with the people to further change — by expanding the benefits of land reforms to improve the status of landless agricultural workers; by organising and working towards the improvement of livelihoods in the unorganised sector; by focussing on primary education and health; by involving its cadre from the lower segments of society in a way that they could be taken into higher leadership — the party was merely reduced to an arbiter of sorts, with decisions taken in a top-down manner, leadership remaining ossified and dominated by the upper castes and the focus restricted to winning elections.⁷ On a similar vein, Ranabir Samaddar has explained the hubristic logic of the Left Front rule and the process of its inevitable collapse:

...party substituted for society, local bosses working as local barons substituted for the party, party committees substituted for government’s intelligence wing, inviting speculative and comprador capital appeared as steps towards organic industrialisation of the state and protests began to be considered as conspiracies against Left rule...⁸

Samaddar, however, characteristically pushes the envelope and characterises the entire period of 1977-2011 as an era of “passive revolution”,⁹ and declares that this is an ongoing story of transition.¹⁰ In this, there is the implicit suggestion of the “lower classes” coming to power through electoral means by and in 2011 and the people practising “popular democracy in an epoch of passive revolution.”¹¹ Herein lies the source of much debate among the commentators. But, for my purposes, suffice it to say that both thinkers locate the *fons et origo* in the initial years of Left Front rule, albeit, to my mind, the former does so in terms of a declensionist process while the latter understands it as the foundational aporia of the parliamentary left. Be it as it may, contemporary observers and commentators in the 1980s failed to descry these

⁶ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, “Left in the Lurch: the Demise of the World’s Longest Elected Regime?” *EPW*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 16 Jan, 2010

⁷ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*, Cambridge University Press, 2016

⁸ Ranabir Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal, 1977-2011*, Sage, 2013, p. XVI

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. xxiv-xxv

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 234

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 202, p. 234

processual lapses and/or structural faultlines owing probably to their historical propinquity in part and hopeful over-enthusiasm in part. This paper endeavours to make possible such an analysis within the time-frame of 1977-1982. Further, to land reform and local self-government, this paper wishes to add a third plank—that of coping with the refugee situation created by the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and severe floods. In fact, the Left Front government often credited itself with an efficient management of these “problems”.¹² This claim could probably be put to test through a study of another momentous historical event in the first five years of Left Front rule: the Marichjhapi incident which refers to the forcible eviction in 1979 of Bangladeshi refugees on Marichjhapi island in the Sundarbans, and the subsequent death of thousands by police gunfire, starvation, and disease.¹³

¹² N. Jose Chander, *Coalition Politics: The Indian Experience*, Concept Publishing Company, 2004; pp. 105-111

¹³ Madhumay Pal (ed.), *Marichjhapi: chhinna desh, chhinna itihaash*, Gangchil, 2012; Sukharanjan Sengupta, *Marichjhapi Beyond & Within*, FrontPage Publications, 2010; etc.