

Nor'wester for the Left

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16th May 2009 will go down in India's history as a red-letter day; it was also a 'Red Rout Day'. After many years, a national party came very close to gaining majority in a Parliamentary election and after Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, a Sikh bureaucrat proved psephologists' 'anti-incumbency' hypothesis wrong and became Prime Minister for a second successive term. This massive mandate was indeed unexpected and caught the BJP and the left parties on the wrong foot. In West Bengal, people wanted a change, not merely out of an 'anti-incumbency feeling' but being disgusted and dismayed by illegal advances of a 32-year ruling left junta. A pro-Mamata wave was rising; to this was added the charisma of Sonia Gandhi and dynastic faith in her son, Rahul. The results in West Bengal showed that the Congress just retained its 2004 outcome but making a piggy-back ride on its back, the TMC increased its tally by 18 more seats, an 18- time increase over its 2004 tally of only one. As Mamata Banerjee says, it was indeed a 'miracle'.

Luckily, in an article to a Kolkata daily, this writer made a 'near correct' prediction. Votes are secret and the electorate's choices often stem from a slew of complex factors, except for those, committed to left parties, who look upon them, sentimentally, as in an English proverb, "My mother, sober or drunk!" Voters may promise to support a party, or a candidate, out of courtesy or fear, but may not keep it in the privacy of a booth. Nevertheless, a tentative outcome can be predicted from results and trends of 2004 Lok Sabha and 2006 Assembly elections as well as from the last year's three-tier Panchayet polls, in which the electors were, by and large, the same. Certain momentous events that occurred owing to political and administrative failures of the ruling coalition and the government since the 2004 election would influence their choices. The outcome will also be influenced by certain administrative developments, like the delimitation and redistribution of Assembly segments in 2009 Lok Sabha constituencies and the creation of eight new replacing as many in 2004 poll, but keeping the total number at 42.

This writer assumed that the votes in these three legislative elections will, by and large, be replicated in the Lok Sabha poll, because a large majority can neither distinguish between a State and a Central election, nor differentiate the issues in each. Sizeable swings of supporters and of some local leaders denied tickets, or marginalised in other ways, to the TMC and the INC were, in reality, tip of an iceberg of disenchantment and lack of confidence in left parties. The defeat of the SFI and DYFI candidates in many college and university students' union polls and the exit of left representatives in the executives of some high-profile corporate bodies and institutions also indicated loss, if not reversal, of leftist dominance. The tribal revolt in West Midnapore district, following police excesses in Lalgarh to nab the culprits of landmine blast on the Chief Minister's convoy near Midnapore town on 3rd November, last year, stoked the embers of discontent over chronic backwardness of the tribal population of Bankura, Purulia and Birbhum and weakened the left stronghold in the regions. These denied the prospects of the left candidates, contesting from these five districts. By

default, the supporters of left parties including those among the tribal and hill people swung to these two parties who support, or sympathise with, their causes.

ADVERSE EVENTS

Many other events in the last five years would affect the poll prospects of the left parties and the TMC. For the Left Front government, these were surrender of unspent development funds and subsidies, particularly for people 'below the poverty level', like *Indira Abas Yojana*, *Antyodaya*, mid-day meals to primary school children, Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), modified rationing, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for 100 days' work in a year etc., year after year. In the same category, were the unspent Local Area Development funds of the MPs who get 100 million of rupees in five years on the account and various scams, like that of ration dealers in 2007-'08, abetment to suicide of a Muslim Boy, Rizwan-ur Rehman who married a rich Hindu girl, by senior officers of Kolkata police, expulsion of writer Tasleema Nasreen to appease a minority community whose welfare receives scant attention. Starvation deaths of tribal people in Amlasol and Belpahari, recent life sentence to some 56 CPI(M) cadres, convicted in a murder case in Birbhum as well as the sudden loss of jobs of some 75,000 PTTI teachers of primary schools because of the government's error and apathy can also rock the Front's boat. Special favours to M/S Tata Motors and the Salim Group of Jakarta to set up a cheap car factory at Singur and a chemical hub and SEZ in Nandigram, respectively, and the unseemly fracas by the TMC, leading to the closure and relocation of the NANO unit, concealment of the agreement with the Tatas, a spree of acquiring arable land for handing over to investors for a song, mounting public debt of a whopping 1520 billion rupees on 1st March, this year, rising bankruptcy of the State exchequer, a spate of laying foundation stones of projects that may never come up, alienated many voters from Front candidates.

The most atrocious event to swing away voters from the Marxist stronghold was the yearlong terror and turmoil in two blocks of Nandigram in 2007, climaxing in wanton firing by the police and hired goons on 14th March that year, killing at least 14 and wounding a few hundred and making many more flee their homes in fear. Similarly outrageous was the brutal police assault on protesting farmers of Singur, rape and murder of a local girl by a regional leader and cadre of the CPI CM) in early 2008. The Chief Minister's public confession of giving up socialism and embracing capitalism, the Marxists' bete noire since Karl Marx, his habitual lies to the media, arrogance, calls for reprisal and violence by the peasant Leader, Benoy Konar and the Politburo member, Brinda Karat and wilful distortion of facts by the State Secretary, Biman Bose and the CITU head, Shyamal Chakraborti, protests by erstwhile Marxist intelligentsia and artistes like Sankha Ghosh, Bibbas Chakraborti, Aparna Sen, Saonli Mitra, Subha Prasanna, Jogen Choudhury over Nandigram and other mayhems, demanding a change would also tilt the balance. Recently, the attacks by local CPI(M) cadres on the Motua religious community at Bongaon also alienated a number of minority voters in the constituency. Another 'Himalayan blunder' that paved the way for the left rout was the withdrawal of left support to the UPA government on Indo-US nuclear deal issue and expulsion of a veteran communist leader, Somnath Chatterjee, alleging defiance of party dictate. If the UPA government depended

on this support till the polls in April, the INC would not have gone into a seat-sharing agreement with the TMC, as it did not in 2004 Lok Sabha and 2006 Assembly polls, this avalanche on the left candidates in West Bengal too would not have come to pass. Kolkata media, particularly two Bengali newspapers, also helped to spread a mass disenchantment by consistent coverage of the pitfalls and failures of the left parties and the government.

In the last three Panchayet polls in 1998, 2003 and 2008, the seats of four left parties in the Front in Zilla Parishads came down and those of the INC and the TMC dramatically increased. In just a decade, the CPI(M) lost 100, the CPI three, the RSP one and the Forward Block six, while the INC gained by 65 (97-32) and the TMC by a whopping 84 (122-38) seats. The last year's poll saw maximum loss of grassroots support to these left parties. In the 2008 poll, the TMC candidates wrested more Gram Panchayet, Panchayet Samity and Zilla Parishad seats in North 24-Parganas, South 24-Parganas and Midnapore East districts than five left and 10 other parties and independent candidates, except the INC which did the same in Malda, Murshidabad and North Dinajpur districts. It followed therefore, that the Lok Sabha constituencies in these six districts will go in favour of the TMC and the INC, even if there was no alliance. In Nadia, the INC and the TMC together won in 546 more Gram Panchayets than the left parties and in Howrah, they together 170 GPs more than the latter. Therefore, because of the INC+TMC alliance, a large number, if not all, of the ten Lok Sabha constituencies in these nine districts were likely to go in favour of the 'right alliance'.

Delimitation of Assembly segments in Lok Sabha constituencies for 2009 election, following increase of the electorate in 2004 segments affects the outcome. Although the total number of Lok Sabha constituencies has remained at 42 and that of Assembly constituencies at 294 (42×7) as many as 41 constituencies have shed up to five old segments and embraced as many new ones; there is no change only in Alipurduar constituency. The most drastic redistribution of segments occurred in Kolkata South and Jadavpur constituencies (five in each) and in Durgapur "(renamed as Burdwan-Durgapur) and Vishnupur (SC) in Bankura constituencies. If she did not have immense popular support and charisma, exit of five old segments in Kolkata South could have affected the poll prospects of TMC Leader, Mamata Banerjee and made 2004 runner-up, Robin Dev (CPI-M) overtake her. Besides, delimitation led to abolition of eight 2004 constituencies and creation of as many through recast of Assembly segments. The 2004 constituencies of Malda, Nabadwip, Kolkata North-East, Kolkata North-West, Panskura, Burdwan, Durgapur and Katwa were replaced by Malda North, Malda South, Ranaghat, Bongaon, Kolkata North, Ghatal Burdwan East and Burdwan-Durgapur, respectively.

The results of the 2006 Assembly elections came two years before those of the Panchayet poll and were taken into account to predict the results of the current poll. The 'anti-incumbency' theory of psephologists did not work in West Bengal for three decades, but this time it did, added with other reasons. The sixth Left front scored a thumping victory in 2006 Assembly election, which buoyed the Chief Minister to taunt the TMC ("We are 235 and they are only 30"), which he had to recant and apologise for at the behest of the Politburo. The TMC won in 31 seats and the Congress in 21 but if they allied for seat-sharing as now, their

candidates could win in as many as 50 more Assembly segments. Additionally, it would have rendered some 67 other Assembly segments that elected left candidates vulnerable to the INC+TMC alliance, i.e., votes polled by the INC and TMC candidates in these segments in 2006 would have added up to less than 10,000, polled by the winning candidate, which can be made up in a favourable ambience. The vulnerable segments are, of course, not as certain to elect alliance candidates as the former. These two probables have been taken into account to predict the results of the current poll.

The Panchayet polls are fought on rural issues, whereas the issues in a Lok Sabha poll are national and regional. Over a third of rural people who are illiterate and have no access to the print media do not understand, or have not even heard of, national issues, like Indo-US nuclear pact, 'independent' foreign policy, the pros and the cons of globalisation, or 'Third Front' and have very scant awareness of regional issues, like industry versus agriculture etc. They are moved by local and even personal issues, like acquisition of their farm land, creation of jobs, guarantee of security, peace, power and water supply for drinking and irrigation, labour wages etc. even when they cast their votes in the Lok Sabha poll. In fact, political parties and leaders, canvassing for Lok Sabha poll make promises on these accounts, while soliciting for their votes.

It is well-nigh impossible to separate national, regional, local and personal issues in an educated, urban voter's mind. The media and party publicity perhaps somewhat affect his choice but it's doubtful if these, or anything else, can reverse, or dramatically alter, his decision; only a catastrophe like the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1983 and of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 that swung votes to the INC, or a calamity like Internal Emergency in 1975-77 that did the reverse, can cause a mass swing, overriding fixed choices. The yearlong pogrom in Nandigram in 2007, for example, did disenchant a large number of voters about the Left parties and the Front government, as reflected in the Panchayet polls and the bye-election in Nandigram, a CPI stronghold for many years. The mayhems in Nandigram and Singur might have adversely affected the traditional prospects of left parties in Bishnupur (south 24-Parganas) and Sujapur bye-elections too.

In every legislative election, there are two kinds of issues- the micro and the macro. In the Lok Sabha election, the micro issues varied from region to region and from locality to locality. For example, in Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong Assembly segments, Nepalese and Gorkha voters were likely to vote, en masse, for Jaswant Singh (BJP), as the party promised to sympathetically consider their demand for Gorkha-land, if it came to power. In West Bengal in constituencies like Tamluk, Midnapur, Bankura and Purulia, disenchantment with the LF government was so deep that most left contenders were certain to lose. Macro issues are not likely to sway rural voters and the promises like L K Advani's to retrieve rich Indians' money, stashed in Swiss and other foreign banks, were unlikely to affect many votes. The Marxists' demand for an 'independent' foreign policy was of the same kind.

Applying these parameters, i.e. the wins and margins in 2004 Lok Sabha, 2006 Assembly, 2008 Panchayet polls and events adverse to the Left Front government in the last five years, it appeared likely that the INC and TMC candidates together could win in 27 constituencies, BJP and SUCI contenders in one each and the

Left Front candidates in 13. And as that came very close to the actual results, the 16th May brought a virtual nor'wester for the Left Front parties and the government in West Bengal. □□□