

BIHAR

## Left in the Lurch

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For the first time did the Left win just one seat in the Bihar Legislative Assembly. The lone seat, went in favour of the CPI candidate Abdhesh Kumar Rai from Bachhwara constituency in Begusarai, had apparently a big margin of over 12,000 votes over the second in the contest Arvind Kumar Singh (Independent). Yet this happened due to split in anti-Left votes: Lok Janshakti Party (19301), Congress (19080) and BJP (15241). Absurd as it may appear today, in 1967, the party won 24 out of 162 seats it contested and got 6.91 percent of valid votes and in 1969, although it got 25 seats out of 162 fought for, it got 10.10 p.c. of votes. But now the party has to fight for its existence. Time was—the 1960s and the 1970s—when the party's identification sign was intrepid defence of the toiling people and their causes and its expression in mass struggles—the young generations with a penchant for democratic rights and life may not think of. The 'wretched of the earth' no longer look up to the CPI as the saviour.

The CPI(ML) Liberation, never-failing in boasting as the strongest Leftist party in the state put up candidates in 104 seats, had five MLAs in the previous Assembly but this time drew a blank, having a share of 1.79 p.c. of total votes (valid), bagged. It lost Balarampur seat by less than 2800 votes than the winner Independent challenger but the Nationalist Congress Party and LJP got 16,474 and 7,795 votes respectively. It was a little more than 4000 behind the winning BJP candidate at Arwal but the low margin was due to cut-away of 15,515 votes by the LJP. The same thing happened for the CPI which lost the Tegharia seat by less than 6000 votes and Harlakhi seat by about 6700 votes. However, it didn't perform as disastrously as the CPI(ML) as it got 1.69 p.c. of total votes with 56 candidates in the fray, while the CPI(M), with less than 35 contestants in the battle, got just 0.71 p.c. votes. On the other hand, in over 70 out of 104 seats CPI(ML) forfeited security deposits. Of the 26 friendly contests between the party and CPI/CPI(M), its candidates were behind the latter in 20 seats, thus virtually proved itself as a *vote-katwa* party. It got 407 votes in Bhagalpur, 678 in Farbesganj and Madhubani, 804 in Bihar Sharif, 815 in Banka, 818 in Katihar, 828 in Pipra, 847 in Bankipur, 929 in Bihpur, 982 in Sheikhpura and got less than 1500 votes in at least another 22 seats. The party leadership skipped admission of such disastrous response from the electorate and in lieu of picked up seats where it got more than 10,000 votes and became third or fourth and blamed delimitation for setbacks. Sadly true, a party that once raised high expectations among the downtrodden, was dwarfed by cruel casteism, the powerful weapon of feudal hang-up in the state.

To be precise, the Left which had been a force to reckon with in Bihar until the mid-1990s and especially in the 1960s and 1970s is now facing the crisis of visibility. Take the CPI(ML) Lib whose leadership was almost sure of increasing its MLAs from existing five to over eight but it drew blank. The party now symbolizes failed expectations although the leadership seems reluctant to go in for a serious ultra-scan of its fast-declining influence. Tragically enough, instead of owning the blame for the most disastrous performance in the last decade, the CPI(ML) Lib in the editorial of its mouthpiece *Liberation*, once again proved its smartness in expression. Somewhat forced to describe the 85 p.c. majority by the ruling alliance, it characterized the poll verdict as "a stunning verdict- a very rare phenomenon in the history of parliamentary democracy anywhere in the world". Evading the task of an ultra-scan of the party's tactical line that got almost nil response from the electorate, the editorial tried to buck up the sagging morale of the rank and file by referring to "how quickly majorities can melt into thin air in the heat of mass struggles" following "euphoric majorities" and asked the

cadres to "go deep among the people, resume hard work and prepare for the future. Let us turn the developmental aspirations of the people into a powerful political struggle for real development".

But can vacuous verbiage cover up the sanguinary reality of vertical decline? It is woefully true that the CPI(ML) Lib leadership banks more on pat at the back by the media than confronting the toughened plight of the economically weaker sections under the Fund-Bank-dictated neo-liberalism.

The Left has to take lessons from the decimation of CPI which in 1967, won five Lok Sabha seats on its own. A middle-aged CPI member whose family had done a lot for the rise of CPI into a party of pride, told this writer, "Our party suffered to a great extent for leaders of questionable character like Suraj Prasad and Gaya Singh, unfortunately backed by the general secretary A B Bardhan for his factional goals. When Lalu was poaching CPI MLAs and breaking CPI's mass base, these biggies were in competition with CPI(M) leaders such as the late H K Surjeet and Sitaram Yechury in buttering Lalu Prasad Yadav and his sidekicks. During those days Nitish Kumar was of very little significance but he called on Bardhan at Ajoy Bhaban, Patna with the offer to forge a front against Lalu. But great Bardhan was so much drugged by Surjeet that he failed to see the justification (read tactical move) for opening a new front even though Lalu was actively engaged in breaking CPI. In fact, today's RJD leaders like Shakil Ahmed and Naresh Das are ex-CPI characters. In those days CPI should have fought tooth and nail against Lalu for saving its mass base instead of appeasing him and also opened joint front with Nitish". Had Bardhan bent a little backward, the CPI could push forward with Left flag fluttering and Nitish Kumar too could not easily walk into the saffron camp.

The Left refuses to reckon the reality that this election was not about *vikas* (development) or even about *bipaas* (bijali, paani, sadak), but about *aas* (hope). For the *aam admi* of Bihar, Bihar is still a way behind the development that could terminate abject poverty which the caste-ridden people consider as punishment due for their misdeeds of previous lives. But they realize the fruits of good governance through iron-handed determination to uproot socialization of criminalization after three decades. This is shared across the caste and class divide. Bardhan or Yechury has forfeited the moral right to compliment the CM for this perceptible change as both of them supported Lalu but CPI(ML) Lib leaders never compromised with Lalu. They could welcome this step while rapping Nitish for shelving the land reform report, prepared by Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, architect of *Operation Barga*. Nitish Kumar in an interview to *Business Standard*, assured, "our target is to eliminate corruption from the state. For this, we have been doing a lot of work. During our previous stint, we passed an anti-corruption Act. Under the Act, properties of corrupt officials can be seized by the state government and turned into schools. This time also, we are actively involved in making special laws and putting in place special provisions to control corruption. We are in the process of drafting a Right to Service Bill. To curb corruption in local bodies, a Lokpal will be appointed. The important thing is that today there is a structure and willingness within the state government to curb corruption." No state government has enacted this law- Bihar Special Court Bill, 2008, which got presidential consent this year only. The Left may return into the reckoning by working as sort of a watchdog on this. They can pull up the government for ignoring about 10 million people, trapped between two embankments of Kosi river which inundates large tracts of north Bihar in every three out of five years. These people are unrecorded as Kosi victims. Those subalterns are taken for a ride by the JDU-BJP government. The literacy rate among Kosi victims varies between 19.93 percent at Salkhua block of Saharsa district to 34.04 p.c. at Basantapur of Supaul district, much below the average rate of 30.11 percent in the state. The female literacy is pathetically low at 14.39 p.c against state percentage of 33.57. However, Bihar is much behind the national literacy rate of 65.38 p.c. and female literacy rate of 54.16 p.c.

The Left can needle Nitish Kumar on above issues but must have the courage to thank him for an uncompromising stand against criminali-zation and assurance to curb corruption. The three CPs may serve as a watch dog entities to prevent reversal on these issues. All hope is not lost if these parties realize that in even peaceful extra-parliamentary struggles, upholding of democratic aspirations is more fundamental task than chanting Left slogans. □□□