

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Whither Bengal?

[A Draft for Discussion]

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AFTER THREE AND A HALF DECADES of Left Front rule people find Bengal to be in a pretty bad shape and not just because here roads are dirty or pot-holed or that investments are not coming in the desired quantum. Bengal is faced with a deep and serious crisis. People in this part of the globe are at a crossroads and they have to decide which way to move. Do they just remove this government and replace it with another one, or do they reject parliamentary politics and take up arms, or create a so-called non-political civil space and keep themselves away from the dirty world of everyday electoral politics? The Left Front rode to power on the crest of a long tradition of left and democratic peoples' movements, but today the Left has strangled both democracy and popular movements. Nor has the Left succeeded in achieving the minimum marks in economic, social or human development. The low ranking of Bengal in the Human Development Index is an important indicator. Critical thinking on public issues is also a thing of the past due to both, left authoritarianism as well as the cultural and intellectual decline of Bengal.

After nearly three decades of near silent suffering the struggles in Singur and Nandigram opened up a new hope for the people of this state. However, it did not take very long for these struggles to be appropriated for narrow electoral purposes, or they became a happy hunting ground for the Maoists. The state and the CPM-led Left Front are making a last ditch effort to re-establish their hegemony and that is resulting in endless violence, bringing people once again on the brink of a near civil war, especially in the contested territories of rural Bengal.

As citizens all would agree that the Left Front must go and people need a 'parivartan' or change. But the million-dollar question is whither parivartan or change in which direction? Who will set the agenda for change and show and lead the direction of change?

THE POLITICS OF BUS BURNING

Bus burning is, perhaps, a good metaphor for describing the politics of the ordinary citizens of Bengal. Given the awful roads and transport system accidents routinely occur and innocent pedestrians die. People are outraged; they gather and burn the vehicle and lynch the driver and go back once the police take charge and with clockwork regularity re-assemble when the next accident happens. Perhaps, many are not aware that more people in the world have died in road accidents than in wars or riots or terrorist attacks. This is a fact. But as citizens people don't demand that road and transport system be re-examined; that serious changes be made and that they as citizens take the initiative for both a critique and offer an alternative. It's the same with most other issues, all run after them once they happen. In other words let the people set the agenda and let the people decide and let the people rule. That's what democracy is all about.

Citizen politics has become reactive; when they don't burn buses they tend to turn towards a ritualized mode of protest—walk from College Square to Esplanade or assemble at the Metro channel. Deep down imaginary of politics is imprisoned by the romance of revolution. Then they tend to assume that nothing can really change unless the revolution takes place and since revolution is not round the corner; they just wait for revolution and meanwhile while away their time in the rituals of reactive politics. Some, of course, primarily

prepare for the impending revolution. Street protests are extremely important as was seen during the Singur-Nandigram struggle, but they can't remain the only mode of citizen politics. If they do it turns into a ritual and becomes toothless. At best, it can act as a safety valve for popular anger.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Historically the most important question raised by the left has been the issue of justice. To the left the fight for justice was not over some questions of policy or law. It was about overthrowing and changing an entire social order. It was translated into a revolutionary fight against feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. Unfortunately, the collapse of socialism in Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in China have not goaded the left into rethinking this model of politics. If this historic experiment has taught progressives any lesson it is the importance of democracy and the rejection of *dalatantra* or partiarchy, which of course is patriarchal as well.

The very existence of a democratically elected communist party led government in Bengal for more than 33 years is an event of great historical significance and lessons have to be drawn from this experiment. That they were all fraudulent communists or agents of capital from day one would be a sorry substitute for any serious analysis. In spite of a long left government with considerable mass support why is Bengal in such a miserable state on almost all counts. The state could not even achieve full literacy, public health system is in a shambles, malnutrition and widespread starvation is a fact of life, and education system has simply crumbled. The radical left and democratic tradition of mass movements and organization building and counter-hegemonic cultural and intellectual interventions has all but disappeared under this long left rule. Instead, today it has turned into an authoritarian party-regime, which has surrendered to capitalism and its culture is no different from other corrupt and inept forms of rule. However, one must recognize its major achievement and that was putting a formal end to feudalism in the countryside, but due to the absence of any alternative vision and policy it could not usher in a justice or provide the livelihood needs of the rural population.

A FAILED HISTORICAL OPPORTUNITY

From the 1930s till the early 1970s the Left in Bengal played a glorious role in modern Indian history. First it organized and led a series of militant mass movements of different sections of the people. Secondly, it embarked on a serious programme of party and mass-organization building; thirdly, through a series of political-cultural-intellectual interventions the left challenged the hegemony and authority of the ruling classes and laid the foundations of their counter-hegemony. The goal of the Left was revolution; it believed that Indian capitalism, feudalism, state and democracy did not offer any space for democratic transformation here and now, except that the Left could give some relief to the people, bring about limited land reforms and could use their governments to further the popular struggle. To the Left democracy and the democratic space was merely a means for preparing for the subversion of the existing state and make the road to revolution faster and easier. The Maoists in the late 1960s were not even prepared to concede this limited space to democracy in India and called for an immediate armed revolution. As a result the historical opportunity opened up in the late 1960s of deepening the democratic process and furthering the democratic revolution, instead used democracy as a mere means for consolidating the Left parties and subverting the democratic process, civil society and democratic institutions itself.

This pushed Bengal to the brink of a civil war and unleashed unprecedented state repression on the entire Left. The Naxalites were physically decimated and the parliamentary left was suppressed and defeated and then it made a historic compromise with the Indian state and capitalism. Like 1967, 1977 was another turning point in contemporary history and the Left in Bengal got another historical opportunity, this time for nearly four decades. Though the CPM-led Left came to power, it was a defeated force, which had made a historic

compromise with state and capital. As a result, unlike the earlier counter-hegemonic strategy of the Left it concentrated on giving relief to the people, especially to its class bases and implemented limited land reforms. It concentrated most on building the political hegemony of the CPM by a concerted strategy of controlling every organ of the state, civil society and rural society. To consolidate its power and domination it systematically destroyed all opposition – both political as well as cultural and intellectual. Over time it built a veritable patriarchy or *dalatantra* as it has been christened in Bengali—it is the establishment of a quasi-fascist dictatorship of the party. The parliamentary Left completely gave up its earlier strategy of building mass movements and creating left-democratic counter hegemony through critical cultural-intellectual debates.

Blinded by power and imprisoned by an orthodox ideology the Left Front just did not know the opportunities and possibilities under a democracy. More than a mere sellout to capital it was the total failure of the intellect and imagination of the Left and a near total identification with the urban and rural middle classes. Given its belief in the limited options the CPM never imagined it would continue to stay in power for so long and then it had to show its achievements and give further ‘relief to the people’, which basically meant more pay and some doles for the people. Defeated in the early 1970s now it completely surrendered to capital and saw investments to be the only option before it. The Left government went all out to woo investments and make Bengal a safe and attractive destination for global capital. The logical culmination of this mindset and policy led it to the fiasco the Left created for itself in Singur and Nandigram.

SOME LESSONS

In one word the most important lesson one may take from the left experiment in Bengal is the centrality of democracy in every sense of the word. Democracy is not simply a form of government where the people only have the right to choose a majority, which would rule. Democracy is a way of life where every person is free and is entitled to equal rights and no majority, however big, can deny these rights. If democracy is a way of life it has to extend to every aspect of people’s lives—from the political to the social, to the economy and to private and personal lives. It has to extend to culture, world of ideas and intellect and imagination. If democracy remains merely a form of government where the majority rules then it becomes merely legal-constitutional or formal and outside this narrow sphere based on elections there is no scope for justice, freedom or equality. The winning of a majority also gives the ruling party an excuse to deny all rights to those who contest the electorally determined majority view. Democracy gets reduced to majoritarianism and helps legitimize authoritarianism of all kinds. The most important issue is to extend the struggle for democracy to every sphere of human existence.

The extension of democracy to all aspects of lives basically means establishing justice, freedom, rights and peace. For there cannot be any democracy where there is no justice or peace. Likewise there cannot be any justice or peace if there is no democracy. Justice, peace and democracy are inseparable. The most important issue today is how does one fight for democracy, justice and peace—here and now.

The Left in Bengal managed to justify its authoritarian rule by its ability to not only win elections but it also extended the majority principle of rule, based on elections, to large areas outside the government. For example it extended it to the villages and districts through the panchayati raj; or the regular elections it holds and wins in educational institutions—from school managing committees to elected vice-chancellors in universities. This is an unprecedented feat of the left, especially if one compares it with other states. But this has not ushered in freedom and democracy for the people in the villages or in universities. In Calcutta University every year, since the 1980 the official left student organizations win more than 580 seats out of 600 without any contest. This is still continuing. This is largely true for other bodies of the university as well. And a university is supposed to be a place for serious

intellectual debate and criticism and CU has a long political history, yet there lies a situation where the electoral principle has been used merely as a means to legitimize the authoritarian rule of the CPM. To a very large extent this is also true in the panchayati raj; though there is more contestation there the CPM through a clever combination of violence and persuasion have managed to legitimize their authoritarianism.

This does not mean that elections are a sham and have to be rejected or avoided. It means that the democratic process has to be reestablished and that is the fundamental task in Bengal today. The mere replacement of one party by another is no way out. The reestablishment and deepening of the democratic process basically involves independent and active participation of different sections of the people in this exercise. It involves serious public debate and criticism and active involvement of the people in recreating the festival of democracy. And the fight for democracy cannot be divorced from the fight for achieving justice and peace; otherwise democracy merely remains an empty form.

TOWARDS DEMOCRACY, JUSTICE AND PEACE

Historically the failure of capitalism to ensure justice and peace led to the struggle for the socialist revolution, but the socialist experiments failed to build democracy. This is the reason why it is essential to rethink ideologies and forms of struggle. Revolutions of the 20th century have failed to build democracy and today even justice has been dethroned. In fact, most ideologies and movements for justice have failed in India, starting from the national movement, the failure of the Nehruvian project and the historical erasure of the Gandhian alternative. Then failure of the left in Bengal and outside is pushing public discourse to opt for the only development model based on investments and a modicum of state welfare. This makes it so important not only to fight for democracy and justice but also imagine new forms of struggle and articulate new ideas to make sense of it all.

India is a democracy of sorts; regular elections are held and parties are free to contest for their different ideologies and people choose their representatives who would rule on their behalf for the next five years. If people choose their representatives, obviously they would choose people who would uphold their views and interests. If their representatives cheat them, next time they would be rejected. But the new party in power again betrays them. Why does this phenomena continue? After all, democracy is supposed to be a government of the people, by the people and for the people. One conclusion is that this democracy is a sham, a fake and has to be overthrown by an armed uprising led by a genuine communist party. Their record in history in building a democracy has been worse than the existing so-called sham democracies. It is true that the promise and possibilities of democracy have not been fulfilled in most parts of the world. Rather, democracy has been turned into an ingenuous mechanism to get the consent of the people to legitimize an existing social and political order. In fact, it ensures this efficiently, by creating space for dissent and protest and change governments that fail to reproduce the legitimacy of the social order. This has been possible because the people have been disempowered and immobilized.

Even when the people are mobilized and struggle political parties have appropriated their power and the best historical examples are the socialist revolution in Soviet Union, the nationalist movement in India and the long left movement in Bengal. All these are examples of long drawn peoples' movements being appropriated by a party to grab power and legitimize the existing order. If democracy is reduced to periodic elections only then it becomes a mechanism to merely get the consent of the people to rule; it does not give power to the people to uphold their views and interests. That does not mean elections are a sham and have to be boycotted, but that people have to organize themselves, assert themselves and empower themselves and finally rule themselves. But why do all this if it does not change their lives, if injustice continues? Thus the struggle for democracy is inseparable from the struggle for justice and peace.

Why have not the people been able to use the existing democracy to come to power and establish justice? There are two major reasons for this; first, the scale of democracy is much too large for the people to make any effective intervention without huge organization, money, and media and muscle power at their command. Even if they succeed to set up such a juggernaut it becomes a huge bureaucratic machine over which the people lose control. So for democracy to be close to real peoples' power it has to operate on a much smaller scale; it has to be a democracy at the grassroots level. It could very well be asked that don't people in Bengal have the best panchayati raj at the local level? Well yes; but a peoples' power where the people have no power. There are no subjects of any consequence over which panchayats have jurisdiction. They work merely as a cheap instrument for implementing different government schemes and policies. They act as a post office handing over mail to the people. So for democracy to be close to real first, people have to demand that democracy be decentralized by devolving real power to the people and panchayats.

Secondly, peoples' power at the local level will only be meaningful when they articulate a vision and programme for establishing, at least, the bare essentials of justice here and now. The left front has wasted this historic opportunity by its belief that justice can only be achieved after the revolution. Of course, the CPM no longer believes in revolutionary Marxism, but some of its belief systems, like revolution, have now constituted the unthought of its imaginary and thinking and thus preventing it from coming up with any serious alternative programme of justice here and now. To the CPM the alternative to revolution is restructuring center-state relations and getting more power and inviting capital investments for the improvement of the people. It is not simply an act of betrayal or sellout to capital; it is more an intellectual and ideological failure.

A n O u t l i n e o f a P r o g r a m m e

However damaged, India is still a constitutional democracy, and thus has some space for struggle, protest and alternatives. If people do not recognize this space they would further help undermine democracy and pave the way for civil war and authoritarian rule. In fact, struggle for democracy would strengthen democracy. There is a crucial distinction between democracy and the Indian state, or for that matter any state. In history everywhere people have fought for democracy against the state; democracy was an assertion of peoples' power and it primarily wanted to curb the arbitrary powers of the state and social classes associated with it. Except for fundamental institutional changes and guarantees of democracy, people have often lost their democratic power and the state came to use democracy to legitimize itself. Thus the battle for democracy has to be continuous to win back peoples' power and its control over the state. Secondly, the state has to be democratized through struggles.

Democracy is a complex of institutions, laws, processes, struggles and ideas and each of its aspects is central to its survival and health. It means people struggle, fight for policy changes or new rights and also have their say in elections. In Bengal today people are faced with an impending election, which will considerably shape the future. If they want to end this authoritarian party rule to end they will have to join hands with the opposition during elections. That does not mean surrendering the very existence and joining the main opposition. Rather, it means allying with the opposition in helping the left front rule to end, but asserting independence through struggles and perspectives. It means allying with the opposition and at the same time maintaining a critical distance. And that role progressives will have to play on a much larger scale after the elections are over. At a time when increasing violence is undermining democracy, struggle for democracy has to voice the need for peace. A peoples' campaign for peace is imminent, otherwise it will destroy democracy as well. If people remember the political violence in Bengal in the late 1960s and early 1970s they should also remember that it paved the way for a long spell of authoritarianism under Siddharta Ray. This once again points out the inseparable relationship between democracy

and peace. The long term struggle for democracy, of course, has to be based on a fundamental change in the existing institutions of power and laws to enable a working democracy at the grassroots level.

In concrete terms the struggle for democracy today should consist of the following tasks:

1. Organize a peace campaign to end political violence—both state and non-state violence.
2. Re-vitalize the deliberative dimension of democracy by organizing public debates and discussions on all public affairs.
3. Participate in the electoral process and in the impending elections organize to defeat the Left Front.
4. Act as a watchdog to strengthen democracy.
5. Struggle to democratize the state.
6. Extend the spirit of democracy to the social, economic, cultural and private spaces and institutions.

JUSTICE

Without justice democracy and peace are mere empty and formal terms; likewise without peace and democracy justice is illusory. The struggle for justice takes place at various levels—from the philosophical to everyday battles for survival. Any struggle for justice must participate in all these levels. The philosophical battle is central to the democratic process of intellectual debates in the public domain over the nature of justice people aspire for. This is an open-ended long-term debate over contending discourses of justice—Marxist, Gandhian, liberal or whatever.

Since there is presently no consensus over the kind of justice one wants, it is better to fall back upon the Indian Constitution's promise of justice. Since everybody, except Maoists, swears by the Constitution it is not out of place to see what the Constitution promises. The Constitutional position on justice is complex and multi-layered. In the Preamble it promises 'Justice, social, economic and political' as well as democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity. Besides the core of the Constitution consists of the Fundamental Rights, which are upheld by the higher judiciary. Finally, the most important part of the Constitution or its spirit is laid down in the Directive Principles. The Directive Principles is a promise, which the Constitution made to the people of India in 1950. Unlike the fundamental rights, one cannot go to a law court for its implementation because it was believed that India in 1950 did not have the resources to realize these promises. But today, when the country can stage a Rs70, 000 crore Commonwealth games or make atom bombs, has a 9% economic growth and where politicians can swindle the public of 190000 crores of rupees in a single telecom deal, what prevents the policy-makers from redeeming the promise made by the very Constitution of India? At least one can bring the Constitutional promises in the public domain from the collective amnesia into which it has been relegated.

The Directive Principles is a crucial part of Indian Constitution and it was included after much debate at the insistence of the Gandhians and socialists in the Constituent Assembly. It is part of the promise of justice made by the state, which helped legitimize democracy. The time has come for launching a nationwide campaign for redeeming the promises made by the Constitution.

The Directive Principles is an important historical document of justice. Among its central promises are new rights, like 'the right to an adequate means of livelihood' and the 'right to work, to education and to public assistance in certain cases' (Arts. 39a & 41). Secondly, it lays down certain fundamental principles and duties of the state while making policy and governing the country. 'The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all institutions of the national life.' (Art. 38) Clause 2 of the same article promises that 'The State shall, in particular, strive to minimize the

inequalities in income, and endeavour to eliminate inequalities in status, facilities and opportunities, not only amongst individuals but also amongst groups of people residing in different areas or engaged in different vocations.’ Article 43 makes it the duty of the state to legislate for securing to all workers ‘a living wage, conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life and full enjoyment of leisure and social and cultural opportunities’. Further the state is duty bound to ‘promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.’ (Art. 46)

Finally, the Directive Principles lays down the vision of a new social, economic and political order by promising that ‘The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government’ (Art. 40). This is a far cry from the present panchayats, which are merely the delivery arms of the state or central government without any power or authority. Self-government here clearly means *gram swaraj*.

The state, the dominant classes and most political parties have used the Constitution to legitimize its power; the time has come to turn the tables and use the Constitution and its promises to fight for justice and democracy. After 60 years of independence if the Constitutional pledge cannot be redeemed then the state can no longer claim its legitimacy and it would be just to rebel and overthrow this state. This is the last opportunity for the people to fight for justice and peace democratically.

In concrete terms struggle for justice should consist of the following steps:

1. Organize a national campaign to compel the state to redeem the promises made by the Constitution of India.
2. Criticize and struggle against all laws and policies, which are contrary to the Directive Principles.
3. Fight for new laws and policies to realize the promise of justice made by the Constitution itself.

For much too long democratic and radical politics have operated in large and grand theatres of history—the world itself, or the nation or at best at the provincial level. All these are scales much too large for people to actually participate and rule democratically. As a result power has slipped into the hands of large and well-endowed organizations and classes and people are reduced to a five-yearly role of casting a vote or occasionally engage in angry street protests. What is urgently needed is to rethink the theatre of democratic politics and power and it is in this context democrats should focus on the district as the basic unit of democracy, politics and power. The district in turn, of course, is further organized in terms of villages and towns. This is very much a description of the panchayati raj system, but a raj without any power. Secondly, not only is power concentrated in the national and state capitals the districts are treated as a hinterland for resources and as a market. So not only should the theatre of politics shift to the locality, village and the district but also the fundamental demand should be the decentralization of power and democracy, where the power and facilities and opportunities of the capital should be at par with every district. Today, the nation or the state is too large a unit and on the contrary, the village is too small. This makes the district the optimum size as a unit of democracy and development.

The most important question is how do activists reach out to every district of Bengal with the vision and struggle for democracy, peace and justice? The answer is not as difficult as it initially appears, for in every district there are concerned people and organizations fighting and struggling over all kinds of issues. Quite often the issues are sectoral, for example there are organizations and struggles over agricultural wages or democratic rights or roads, water or other local facilities. The task is to reach out to these people and organizations and engage with them by holding a series of workshops and conferences to draw up the

blueprint of the struggle for democracy, peace and justice in every district. And it is a task that the people of the district will have to decide for themselves. Social reformers can only coordinate the process and create a forum where all the districts can meet and deliberate and take up issues that have span across districts. □□□