

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

THE RECENTLY concluded state assembly elections in West Bengal are being portrayed as a victory for Indian democracy and a feather in the cap for the Election Commission. The Election Commission did actually field hundreds of companies of para-military forces to prevent the armed gangs of the parties in the fray from systematic rigging and intimidation. One says 'parties', but the CPI(M) was the main outfit feared on this count. No doubt, the Election Commission thwarted the plans of the CPI(M) and voting was free in most booths.

Kolkata was no exception to the show of force—rigging was not attempted except in a few booths (at least two of them in Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's constituency of Jadavpur), although, as usual, more than 30% of Kolkata's electorate did not think it worth their while to walk to the booth in the sun and wait for their turns.

For one thing the Election Commission can claim to have fulfilled the task assigned to them. And the people, voting with much less insecurity than in previous elections, came out in their lakhs to rout the masters of the Harnad. They are upbeat and one can expect a continuation of the people's movement for more power to intervene in decision-making on issues of immediate and long-term interest to them.

But has there been a victory for democracy? One instantly recalls the Kashmir valley, where, until the last elections, army jawans poked citizens out of their beds to go and cast their votes, in order that the Hurriyat's call for a boycott of the elections could be declared a failure democratically. Can democracy be upheld at bayonet point?

The arms and ammunition being swept out of CPI(M) party offices, ponds and hiding places of loyal households show the scale in which the CPI(M) had been preparing to interfere with the election process and intimidate possible voters of the opposition, even apart from deploying the Harnad. Had the Election Commission been less prepared to resist violence or had shown the slightest hesitation in deploying central forces, they would have been swept aside. Where there were delays in the arrival of the central forces, as happened in Garbeta and Kespur, the cadre had a field day.

What this means is that in the absence of 'peace-keeping' forces these elections would have been the bloodiest of all, with booth capture and rigging rampant. Hamlets and neighbourhoods suspected of substantial support to the opposition would have been blockaded away from their election booths by gun toting toughs on motor bikes. Gates of residential complexes would have been locked up, and you, gentle reader, had you been foolhardy enough to venture near the booth flaunting your dubious loyalty, would have been politely informed that your vote had been cast. Kolkata has seen all this and more in the past. One sees that Mamata Banerjee's charges of rigging in previous elections could well have had a core of truth.

Everyone would agree that had all this taken place this time, on the scale suggested by the preparations now revealed, it would not have been democracy. The so-called victory of democracy is, then, merely the victory of the guns of the 'peace-keepers'. Of course, the CPI(M) is not alone in its resolve to write verdicts in its favour by force. The Congress (and the CPI!) under Siddhartha Ray have been the path-breakers in this respect. The CPI(M) has only added its patent brand of organization. All 'mainstream' parties in India maintain armed gangs and utilize every opportunity to suppress and subvert the people's will. The parties in government have the added advantage of being able to use the guns of the police and paramilitary forces.

Of course, the corporates who rule India, along with their allies, much prefer governments which have not, through misrule, lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the people as yet. What better than the people themselves supporting the government in its job of managing the corporates' fleecing of the people and pillage of the land! And this is why the corporates prevailed on Delhi to umpire neutrally the heavyweight match between the CPI(M) and the TMC, both of which swore by 'development'

based on the jobless investment by the corporates. After the bitter experience of the Tatas in Singur, the failure to contain the people's wrath in Nandigram and the Jangalmahal, they needed to know objectively who could supply the peace and quiet necessary for the success of ruthless exploitation, and to ensure that these new champions did actually form the government.

If anything the CPI(M), through misrule, authoritarian conduct, jobbery, and incorrigibly corrupt and high-handed governance had become an East India Company. It was loyal to the crown but the crown had no use for it. Or, to take a better and more contemporary metaphor, the CPI(M) had become a Hosni Mubarak. Like the US, the corporates did one better than remove them by force or Sec 356. They allowed the people to throw them out.

The 'peace-keeping' guns people saw on the streets of Kolkata were not the people's guns, they were the guns commissioned by the corporates. Hardly a victory for democracy! □□□