

STATEMENT

'End of the Left'?

[Following is a text of statement by Jairus Banaji, Sukumar Muralidharan, Dilip Simeon, Satya Sivaraman, Rohini Hensman and endorsed by 224 others, originally posted on Facebook on May 19]

IN A MINOR REPLAY OF 1989 AND the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Indian media have been gloating at the defeat of the Left Front in West Bengal especially and have repeatedly suggested that this signals the 'end of the Left in India'. Even at the best of times Indian news channels tend to avoid serious analyses of the underlying trends within the country, since they have transformed the news itself into a form of entertainment on models surpassed only by the US news networks.

For its part the CPI(M) leadership has been at pains to minimise the significance of the defeat (in Bengal especially) and said that it would be wrong to write off the Left. For them 'the Left' means the Left Fronts in Bengal and Kerala and of course chiefly the CPI(M) itself. They stress the fact that they still retain a considerable vote share, just over 40% in West Bengal for example, and there is indeed some truth in this claim.

But the endorsers of this statement beg to differ sharply from both the positions stated above. To begin with, the Left in India is not the Left parties alone and therefore the defeat of the Left parties does not mean the defeat of the Left. The Left in India has never been reducible to these large parliamentary fronts and party machines, much less to the groups embattled in the forests of India, but has always been a much wider spectrum of organisations, movements and forms of struggle that range from the hundreds of left-wing trade unions that exist in the country in all the major industrial centres, unions that are essentially independent of party control and seeking today to form a national federation, down to the dozens of popular campaigns and the organisations connected with them.

These campaigns have fought consistently on issues such as displacement at major sites like the Koel Karo dam, the Baliapal missile range, the Hirakud dam, the Sardar Sarover project, etc., and there has been and continues to be mass opposition to the forced acquisition of land by industrial capital (POSCO, Vedanta, Jindals, the Tatas, Ambanis, and so on) in different parts of the country. There have also been militant resistance movements to SEZs, most notably in Bengal itself (at Nandigram and Singur).

There have been grassroots campaigns for the Right to Information (RTI) and for rural employment schemes. There have been movements and campaigns against communal violence and for justice for the victims of the violence that politicians have repeatedly instigated, notably, the horrific massacres in 1984 (Delhi), 2002 (Gujarat) and 2008 (Kandhamal in Orissa). There have been movements of resistance to the hideous injustices and violence of the caste system; to the oppression of women; to homophobia; and against the forcing of millions of children into wage-slavery. There has been a strong culture of human rights organisations in India and fearless investigations into the atrocities committed at all ends of the political spectrum. There are many cultural and political groups that exist that have never identified or associated with the politics and the peculiar left traditions of the CPI(M) that are still largely moulded by the discredited legacies of Stalinism.

In truth the defeat of the parliamentary left *should* mean space for a stronger left movement, a 'new left' if one likes that reflects the aspirations of the mass of people more creatively, with more imagination and greater integrity. There is too much deprivation and misery in the country for the media or the middle classes to seriously be able to delude

themselves into thinking that popular resistance will cease with the defeat of the Left Fronts. As long as ordinary people are subjected to violence, to oppression and the most appalling poverty, as long as they are denied homes, health services, proper nourishment, decent jobs, denied land for survival, and denied social, political and sexual equality, there will be resistance and opposition. Indians will not settle down passively into the dream images purveyed by TV advertisements, and with the massive depletion of public policy in areas like health and employment they are certainly not about to become one big smiling middle-class family.

The reality is that dispossession continues on a large scale; the culture of communal hatred, violence and conspiracy still thrives in the background waiting to strike again; and large parts of the country are under military occupation. Police brutality continues unabated, lakhs of court cases lie unattended, thousands of people remain in jail as under-trial prisoners, and hundreds of victims of caste and communal violence wait hopelessly for justice. Communal, caste and sexual bias is still endemic at various places in the state apparatus. And by all the social indicators India remains one of the worst performing countries in the world.

So it is premature to 'write off' the Left but not because the Left Front has retained substantial vote shares in Kerala and Bengal. Votes have never been a real marker of the strength of a political movement and its culture. Indeed, the Left Front parties now have a historic opportunity to transform themselves, starting with a conscious effort to introduce more democracy in their ranks and a culture of open debate. Whether their leaderships want such a radical overhaul is doubtful, since even the elementary requirement of accountability for the recent debacle is currently being evaded.

However, regardless of their evolution, it is clear that as long as Indian democracy survives and survives in its broken state as a system unable to nourish the mass of its population or live without violence and the subjugation of whole communities, the Left outside parliament, the left as a culture of democracy and resistance, a network of movements and organisations, and a new more vigorous set of campaigns, will continue to flourish. A younger, more radical generation will undoubtedly be attracted to it and to its values of solidarity, equality, freedom and opposition to capitalism both in India and worldwide. □□□

[source : Kafil, May 24, 2011]