

DRIVING IN REVERSE

## CPM IN BLUNDER LAND

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THE 13TH MAY AVALANCHE that swept away 232 Left Front candidates in the 15th Assembly poll, i.e, reducing its 2006 prowess in the House by nearly 99%, might have left the Front's rank and file agape, but not the rest of West Bengal's over 90 million people. In a political 'snake and ladder' game, as it were, an upbeat party for 34 years was devoured by the python of the TMC-INC-SUCI alliance. The leader party, CPI(M)'s downfall was particularly pathetic, as it scored even less than in its first State poll in 1967, three years after it was founded in Kolkata. In nearly a month after the sixth and last phase of the 'historic' poll, the haze created by the heat and dust of prolonged electioneering has cleared somewhat to enable a dispassionate analysis.

The signal for a change did come on the CPI(M)'s radar after its debacles in the July 2008 Panchayet, June 2009 Lok Sabha and June 2010 municipal polls, as the Opposition's call for change (*Paribartan*) became louder, by day, but Alimuddin Street pretended to ignore it. After the Lok Sabha debacle, the Chief Minister caricatured the call, slighted the TMC's poll successes, and resolved to 'turn round' to lead the front to its eighth victory through the 2011 poll. In two years thereafter, he travelled extensively to districts, made a sincere effort to recharge the administration by announcing new schemes, made many promises and laid a host of foundation stones. His sensational pre-poll promises like selling rice at two rupees a kilo for all, actually for BPL and APL card-holders (which would have further bankrupted the exchequer), bringing Muslims under the OBC and reserving 10% government jobs for their wards were 'too little, too late' for them, crafted with an eye to the poll. All these were like the gyration of a Kathak dancer on her toes, without advancing an inch. Although no opinion or exit poll outcome tally by the media, noted psephological firms and the State, Central and party intelligences came wholly true, but all predicted certain win of the TMC-INC-SUCI alliance.

This humiliating and the first anti-incumbent mandate in the Left regime, spanning 3½ decades, has shattered the party, but not the top brass. Lying low for a fortnight after the announcement of results, they are up again to resume their game of lies, deception and bashing of the Centre and the TMC. They are calling police recovery of illegal arms, ammunitions, weapons and explosives from the bouses, premises, offices and adjacent land of their comrades and cadres a 'TMC conspiracy', saying these are being planted at the sites by the TMC and handed over to the police. The CPI(M) organ, *Ganashakti* calls new Chief Minister's daily surprise visits to Kolkata State hospitals etc., which people acclaim, a 'publicity stunt'. In a thinly attended first post-poll meeting in central Kolkata on 31st May, Buddhadev Bhattacharya lambasted the Centre and new State government for raising petrol-diesel prices, price rise and attack on CPI(M)'s cadres and offices, wrapping them in a tissue of lies and halftruths. A leopard cannot change its spots, nor a tiger its stripes. In hindsight, it seems, after Jyoti Basu's death on 17th January 2010, the party was seized with a death wish that it was unaware of and unable to overcome. After the 2009 Lok Sabha poll debacle, Transport Minister, late Subbas Chakrabarti, PWD Minister Kshiti Goswami and the Fisheries Minister, Kiranmoy Nanda publicly aired that the Front should prepone a fresh mandate, but the top brass ignored it. If it saw the straws in the wind and the State poll was advanced to 2010, the margin of Left Front's defeat would have been slimmer and less ignominious. That was a blunder.

This was not the *only* blunder that the CPI(M) made; in fact, it made so many since its return to power through the 2006 poll that it was living in a 'blunder land', as it were, in which the top brass roamed, bemused and hypnotised. The media did point out the errors of omission and commission, but the left triumvirate—Biman Basu, Buddhadev Bhattacharya and Nirupam Sen—did not heed them. They were quick to rebut Mamata Banerjee's silliest charges, but were virtually deaf and dumb to serious warnings in the media. The dissident voices in the CPI(M) and in other parties in the Front were not heard; so determined was it on its headlong plunge into self-destruction. If they kept their ears on the ground, they would have heard the murmurs of a *tsunami* that was brewing, deep underground. Before the Lok Sabha and municipal polls, the leaders boasted too of certain victory, reportedly being misled by district committees. This time too, they relied on the reports to make ludicrous forecasts of certain victory. Even though they might have secretly warned of imminent disaster, the leaders in Kolkata put up a brave face to keep up the morale of cadres. This was Blunder Two.

Blunder Three was an over-indulgence in calumny tirade against the TMC supremo, Mamata Banerjee and her party, which boomeranged in the end. The Housing Minister, Gautam Dev's shrill charges of money-laundering in the TMC's electioneering were rubbished by the Election Commission. As a scribe wrote, the more they called her names and levelled false charges against her party, more were CPI(M)'s potential votes lost. The climax came during the poll, when Anil Basu of Arambag publicly called Ms Banerjee a nautch girl for the USA which secretly funded her high-profile campaign and earned rebuke of his party and the Election Commission.

In a sense, the CPI(M) top brass in the State and the Politburo was an unintelligent horde and did not see the straws in the wind before the Mamata hurricane. They prevaricated on the land acquisition issue, with each leader airing their own views, implying that the party had none. This instead of relieving the anxieties of land-owners only aggravated them. Everyday, the party's State Secretary, Biman Basu lied to the media to shield the top brass including himself, reducing himself to a clown. He and the Chief Minister ridiculed the TMC's slogans of 'change' (Parivartan) and *Ma-Mati-Manush* ('The Mother, the Earth and Man') without realising that they were spreading like wild fire all over the State and galvanising people to oust the Front government through the April-May poll. This was Blunder Four.

The manner in which the Chief Minister tried to douse the fires in Singur and Nandigram, raised by his anger and indiscretion, was unwise too. If the Tatas were shown already acquired, but idle land in Haldia, Kalyani, Dankuni and Kharagpur, they would not have chosen and demanded 997 acres of multi-crop Singur land for the NANO factory. No motor car factory in the world needed more than 500 acres; it was wrong, therefore, to acquire 500 acres more. The 1884 colonial Land Acquisition Act does not provide for seeking the consent of land-losers; the former Chief Minister did not use this handle, cleverly, to defuse Ms Banerjee's clamour for returning some 400 acres to 'unwilling' owners and farmers of Singur. When the all-party committee, formed under the Governor's pact, had almost identified 400 acres for return, the Chief Minister dissolved the committee, denying that he had agreed to abide by it. This made Ms Banerjee furious and boycott all LF government meetings. Nandigram mayhem too could be avoided, if the CM had chosen the simpler solution of returning fugitive families of cadres and supporters of his party to their homes under police escort. Surrendering Jangal Mahal to the joint security forces at enormous expense to eliminate Maoists was another Himalayan blunder, because they regrouped in other territories and continued with their mayhems with high casualties on both sides. This was CPI(M)'s fifth blunder.

This 'blunder land' began to form after Jyoti Basu's voluntary exit from power on 3rd November 2000. Like 'original sin', he made the first mistake by letting Buddhadev Bhattacharya succeed him. He is said to have favoured Somnath Cbatterjee, but the then

State Secretary of the CPI(M), Anil Biswas prevailed on him to accept Buddhadev Bhattacharya instead. Mr Chatterjee is a veteran, cool-headed legal luminary and would not have committed the legal and other *faux pas* that Mr Bhattacharya did in Singur, Nandigram and elsewhere. This blunder was repeated when the State Secretary of the CPI(M), Biman Basu did not heed suggestions by some Front ministers to relieve Mr Bhattacharya after the 2009 Lok Sabha poll debacle and both announced their resolve to 'turn round', but courted a bigger disaster. By an irony of fate, the party that Jyoti Basu had built, brick-by-brick, by foresight and cunning in 23 years, was demolished by Mr Bhattacharya and Biman Basu in 11 years. It is too early to predict the success of the TMC-led government, because, as T S Eliot wrote memorably in *Gerontion* (1920): "History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And deceives with whispering ambitions/ Guides us by vanities?" The CPI (M)'s 'blunder land' was ultimately the creation of history too. In Shakespeare's plays, "character is destiny". Arrogance and pride (*hubris*) made the former CM choose difficult solutions and invite disaster in Singur, Nandigram and Netai. It was, as if, astrologically, the Saturn was goading him, blind-folded, to self-destruction. □□□