

GUHA'S SHOCK THERAPY

The Fall of the Left

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In his article 'After the Fall' published in *The Caravan* (June, 2011), Ramachandra Guha has attempted to trace the cause of the 'historic defeat' of the 'Indian Communists' [read the CPI(M)] in the recent assembly elections in Kerala and more importantly in West Bengal. Prof Guha has rightly taken the CPI(M) to task for its age-old dogmatism, arrogance, lack of democratic-mindedness (rather anti-democratic attitude), belief in the invincibility of the Party's truth and hostile stance towards any criticism of the Party's policy. The list of allegations also includes the communists' aversion to modernity and modern technology, private enterprise, multi-party system, freedom of expression and so on.

The author, in the course of his criticism, has advised the CPI(M) to be modern, democratic and open-minded in regard to global politics and economy. Yes, it is advice because Guha has spoken in a prescriptive manner without bothering about whether the target audience is at all listening to him. To quote Guha: '(a) modern left must also appeal to the middle class... If the Left can modernise and present itself as a party of reform, a party that is inclusive and outward-looking, a party committed to social welfare but not opposed to economic growth, it could capture a vote-bank that is far more numerous (than) that represented by its own current special interest, the organised working class.' He has also warned the CPI(M) that it 'must abandon the Leninist dogma that it is the only party that 'understands and represents the interests of the poor and the excluded'. The author has, in fact, advised the CPI(M) to get rid of Leninist dogmas relating to the role of the Party a number of times in his article.

In the end, in more unambiguous terms Guha has prescribed that modern Indian Marxism 'needs a strong dose of revisionism'. He has gone to the extent of wishing them to follow in the footsteps of Deng Xiaoping ('who embraced the market in China'), Eduard Bernstein (who was against 'one party dominance in Germany') and Santiago Carrillo of Spain ('who spoke in favour of multi-party democracy, the mixed economy, an independent foreign policy, cultural pluralism' etc). Should the three communist leaders of three countries, referred to by the author, be placed in one bracket? Does freedom of expression or support for multiparty system compare with an open invitation to the market?

In the beginning of his essay, Ramachandra Guha has dwelt on elaborately how Carrillo had warned the Communists against dogmatism and arrogance and how B T Randive distorted his view to denounce Carrillo. S Carrillo, to go by Guha, had articulated an unprejudiced and democratic-minded view and opined that the Communist party should not claim a monopoly on the truth, should not regard itself as the only representative of the working class; he asserted that Marx, Engels and Lenin were not infallible and in regard to economy, Carrillo admitted that private enterprise had a role but it must work 'in alliance with the State'. Can Deng Xiaoping be called a true follower of Carrillo? Did they vouch for the same path? Carrillo strongly believed in democracy and pluralism. What about the Chinese autocrat?

Ramachandra Guha's thought-provoking article cannot but raise many questions which the author would surely welcome; but alongside it may create a confused reaction in the reader's mind. Yes, Guha is absolutely right. There is no doubt that Communists are utterly dogmatic; and one may find the roots of this dogmatism in the very ideology of Marxism. But, in order to drive home his point, why has the author singled out Randive only? Surprisingly, there is practically no reference to Promod Dasgupta and Jyoti Basu. The blunder committed by the undivided CPI by following the extremist Randive line in 1948 is more-or-less well-documented. The arrogance, dogmatism and sheer cruelty of the CPI(M) during its 34-year-long rule in West Bengal has been widely reported in the media but it awaits a theoretical analysis which one expects of an author of Guha's stature.

But surprisingly enough, Ramachandra Guha has almost overlooked the elemental cruelty of the 'communists'—the way they have systematically perpetrated atrocities on the common people, raped women, hacked people to death, punished some members of the opposition party by chopping off their hands and meted out to them several other barbaric treatments. The CPI(M)'s face and fangs bared themselves not only in recent times, in the Singur-Nandigram period. Leftist rule in Bengal turned the countryside into killing fields long ago. People were gagged, intimidated and the notoriously disobedient ones were just finished off. Guha is certainly well-conversant with all the violent acts committed by the CPI(M). He in fact arrived in Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1980, only a year after the Marichjhampi massacre and was in the city when a number of Anandamargis were brutally done to death in 1982. Guha has a long association with Kolkata.

But his critique of the communists is, by and large, confined to their dogmatism and inhibition towards modernism. He has made a passing reference to the CPI(M)-sponsored violence in Singur-Nandigram and has not attached much importance to the cult of violence celebrated by Communism and the Communists in general. Communists, in this context, of course, do not represent the CPI(M) only. They include Maoists and others who uphold violence for the sake of a 'greater cause' defined by themselves. Violence seems to be intrinsic to communism and is rooted in the very structure of a communist party. In that sense it owes its roots to Maoism, Stalinism, if not Leninism in practice. Ramachandra Guha has however chastened Leninism for its dogmatism only.

One redeeming feature of Guha's article is that he wants the communists to reform themselves by getting rid of their dogmatic principles and inviting modernism with an open-minded approach. Why is the author so keen on laying down a prescription for the reformation of the communists? According to his own confession, he was once a Marxist anthropologist and is presently 'a student of Marxism'. Maybe, Guha still reposes faith in the communists and wants them to catch up with the demands of the new age and thus emerge as a potential, 'modern' political force. When Guha remarks that in India, the communist leaders are 'less greedy and corrupt', most of them are 'gentlemen' and 'they do not live or endorse luxurious life styles', he either ignores or betrays his ignorance of the life-style of the present-day Bengal leaders of the CPI(M).

Interestingly, Guha almost echoes Jyoti Basu while lamenting the CPI(M)'s 'historic blunder' by not allowing Basu to become the Prime Minister in 1996. He also does not like the same party's refusal to join the first UPA Government (2004) and sincerely believes that a reformed CPI(M) would have stood out as a secular, honest national force in contrast with the Congress or the BJP. The author seems to be hoping against hope that the CPI(M) would reform itself in accordance with the direction pointed to by him. For Ramachandra Guha, the CPI(M) appears to be free from the vices characteristic of all other parties. Its only defect is that it is dogmatic and not sufficiently modern.

The refrain of the urgent need for being 'modern' recurs in Guha's article. What does he mean by 'modernity' anyway? In what sense does he want the CPI(M) to modernise itself? Does he mean that to be 'modern' in current days is to 'embrace the market' as Deng in China did? Surprisingly, Guha has made no reference to the growing economic inequality in post-reformation China, the poverty in the countryside and the miserable condition of the workers of closed industries or those working in small factories in the urban areas. On the contrary, Guha has presented Deng as an example to emulate. To accept globalisation and the new economic order which the erstwhile socialist countries including Vietnam have already done or are in the process of accomplishing? Does he hold up this model?

As an eminent scholar and observer, Ramachandra Guha knows for certain that the CPI(M) in West Bengal has already shaken off its what Guha terms 'dogmatism' and is in favour of following the path of market economy. It began by the turn of the last century in the concluding days of the Jyoti Basu regime and Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, who succeeded him, followed this path with gusto. His visit to China might have played a catalytic role in the process of reformation. Let us remind Guha that the CPI(M)-led

Left Front in West Bengal had endorsed the SEZ Act in the assembly in 2003, i.e. two years before the Central Act was passed. During the Singur movement, Bhattacharjee proudly introduced himself as 'an agent of TATA' and much to the dismay of at least some CPI(M) supporters, the party cadres paid 'red salute' to both their leader and Mr Tata ('Tata-Buddha Lal Selam'). Guha has, of course referred to Nandigram and the violence of the CPI(M) but hasn't highlighted the fact that Buddhadev Bhattacharjee felt no qualms about inviting the Salim group of Indonesia to form a SEZ in the state.

Ramachandra Guha's perceptible article has undoubtedly raised many significant issues relating to communism and the communist party. But his analysis may leave many of those who inhabit West Bengal disappointed. We have seen the rise and fall of leftism in Bengal. We have witnessed the twists and turns through which the original party passed over the ages and split into several parties and groups till the formation of the CPI(Maoist). We are also witness to the degeneration of Naxalism into a politics of senseless violence in the 1970s and how the present Maoists are following the same path more vigorously in the Jangalmahal areas of West Bengal and how a 'leftist' state government has oppressed the common people in a typical tyrannous manner on the pretext of curbing political terrorism. Finally, we have painfully experienced the increasing cruelty and corruption of the CPI(M) rule for more than three decades. The question that needs to be reviewed is fundamental : Is the CPI(M) an exception or the inevitable fate of a communist party in power? Should we trace back the degeneration of the Bengal Marxists to the very ideology of communism and the structural paradox of a communist party especially when it remains in power for ages together?

Ramachandra Guha began with hinting at this question but later veered round to the need for reformation in keeping with the changed global economy. His analysis may satisfy the advocates of globalisation but will not help a committed but demoralised leftist. □□□

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1. 'Dogmatism', however, is not typical of the communists only. Harold Lasswell, an American political scientist believed that to consider 'men being the best judges of their own interests' is a kind of 'democratic dogmatism' (Noam Chomsky, 'Media Control', 2003, p 20)
2. The inherent arrogance and cruelty of the structure of a communist party has been analysed by Milovan Djilas in his 'The New Class' Unwin Books, 1966.