

THE DECLINE OF OFFICIAL LEFT

CPM's Waterloo

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Of people's verdicts of elections to 5 states assemblies held in April-May 2011, that of West Bengal has emerged out to be of politically most significant as people of the state with a thunderous verdict ensured decisively the exit of the CPM-led Left Front from Writers' Buildings after 34 years of uninterrupted rule and Mamata Banerjee led alliance was given a sweeping victory to be in the citadel of governmental power of the state. Making almost a reversal of 2006 poll verdict, - the verdict 2011 has reduced the Left Front assembly strength from 235 to a mere 62 and that of CPI(M) from 196 to only 40 and thereby has proved once again that it is people who are the makers of history and they cannot be taken for granted.

This clear mandate of the people (though unexpected to many people outside West Bengal) is an expected one as it is in line with the trend of the poll verdict that has been set in since May 2008 three-tier Panchayet election in the state. Since then in successive elections from LS to Municipal polls, CPI(M) and their Front partners have been steadily losing ground to the Trinamul Congress (TMC).

The question that came up after CPI(M)'s LS poll disaster in 2009 has come up this time again and that with greater emphasis—why this stunning defeat to the CPI(M) and their Left partners.

The total number of voters this time was roughly 5,62,84,324 and total vote polled was 4,76,38,129 (an average of 85%). Of the total vote polled Left Front has secured 1,95,55,844 an increase by 11 lakh votes compared to its LS vote. TMC-Congress alliance and its tail ender SUCI together has secured 2,30,75,413. Percentage-wise Left Front has a vote share of 41.05% which is nearly 2.2% less compared to Lok Sabha Poll of 43.28%.

TMC alliance has secured 48.44% compared to its LS poll of 45.69% .

Seat-wise Mamata Banerjee led alliance has won 227 out of 294 total assembly seats registering a 2/3 majority. TMC fielded 227 candidates and won 184, an increase by 154 seats compared to 30 in 2006. Contesting 65 seats Congress riding on Mamata popularity has been able to bag 42 seats compared to 21 in 2006. SUCI has failed to retain its old two seats (which were allocated to them by Mamata Banerjee) as they conceded one seat to the CPI(M). Seat-wise CPI(M) suffered a huge loss of 136 seats compared to 2006 and has been placed in the 3rd position behind Congress. Forward Bloc has been able to win 11 seats as against 23 in 2006. RSP and CPI have secured 4 and 2 respectively compared to their respective tally of 20 and 8 in 2006. Other Front partners DSP and SP have secured 1 each. Rest of the partners of 10 party combine Left Front have drawn flak.

Buddhadeb lost to his onetime chief secretary(retd.) whose political career begins with contesting this election with a TMC ticket in a constituency which is regarded as a strong CPI(M) bastion. By this defeat Buddhadeb joins the rank of erstwhile Congress Chief Minister Dr P C Ghosh who as sitting CM got defeated in 1969 assembly election.

While Buddhadeb lost by a margin of more than sixteen thousand votes his cabinet colleagues Nurupam Sen (Industry minister) lost by a margin of more than 36 thousand, Asim Dasgupta (Finance minister) lost by a margin of more than 26 thousand and Gautam Deb (Urban development minister) lost by a margin of more than 51 thousand vote. It is to be pointed out here that all their constituencies were considered in view of the past successive election victory of the Left candidates to be the strong CPI(M) bastions.

The result as it clearly shows (notwithstanding the fact of securing 41.5% vote) as the worst ever vote balance sheet for the CPI(M).

For many including a section of CPI(M) state leadership such a clear and loud rejection by the people comes as a big surprise. For despite their knowing of the hard reality that this time CPI(M) was fighting with their back on the wall—the toughest election battle since 1977, they nurtured a feeling of hope against hope for a CPI(M) PRATYABARTAN (Return to the power) to Writers' Buildings for the eighth time although margin might be very slender.

The debacle has its beginning long back. To be precise from 1990 - that is from the time of end period of 3rd Left Front govt. under Jyoti Basu.

In 1977 people becoming aghast with the oppressive rule of the autocratic Congress govt. felt a strong urge for a change and voted out of power the Siddhartha Sankar Ray govt. And having no option for a real pro-people alternative (communist revolutionary forces a divided house) installed with overwhelming majority the Left Front. Govt headed by the CPI(M).

Left Front headed by the CPI(M) came to power with its 36-point self professed pro-people reformist agenda of providing immediate relief to the people. Land issue was one of the most important agenda of the 36 points.

And the first LF govt. took up the unfinished agenda of land reforms of 1st and 2nd United Front govt.

To blunt the edge of agrarian revolution oriented radical land reforms programme that the great Naxalbari movement carried forward after historic TELENGANA movement the two successive UF govts. (1967 and 1969 respectively) adopted the policy of reclaiming vest land and distributing it among the landless peasants. This reformist land policy within the present legal bounds of the constitution was framed and adopted by the erstwhile Congress Government but refrained from implementing it properly lest its (Congress) support base among big landowning class in the rural Bengal got strained and start eroding.

The 1st UF govt. started implementing this reformist land policy soon after the Naxalbari uprisings. They carried the slogan—shun the path of Naxalbari and opt for the path shown by Sonarpur. Incidentally it was in Sonarpur in south 24 pgs, they first put into practice their land reform policy. And the first Left Front govt. (1977) under Jyoti Basu took up along with the land reform issue, the issue of protecting the rights of Bargadars (Sharecroppers) and landless peasants. The first Left Front govt. then went for decentralization of power and made three-tier Panchayet system, (held up during Congress rule), a regular feature of rural local self-govt.

The release of political prisoners and reopening and lifting of lockouts of a few closed mills and factories are other examples of their providing 'relief' to the people.

Fulfilling of such other promises of providing 'relief' during the period of 1st and 2nd LF govts. helped expand the vote base of the CPI(M) and for that matter the Left Front in the vast rural belt of Bengal.

This rural support base coupled with the almost complete absence of any effective opposition be it by any parliamentary opposition force (Congress reduced to a signboard) or by extra-parliamentary opposition (Communist Revolutionary Force) undergoing split within split) helped the Left Front retain their citadel of power at the Writers' Buildings' without any formidable challenge.

However, their agenda of expanding and developing the mass movement (one of the main agenda among the 36 pt programme) was put on hold. The slogan "BAMFRONT SARKER SANGRAMER HATIER"

was put into the shelf lest its practice develops class struggle. For by this time the ideological position that they firmly adopted was that of class collaboration as opposed to class struggle.

From then on i.e. the later part of 3rd Left Front, this line of class collaboration began to be more and more reflected on policy and programme pursued by the LF govt. resulting gradual shift in the policy from one of pro-people (however limited and reformist it might be) to one of pro-rich and pro-big Corporate House, both domestic and foreign. And people mostly who work in fields and factories, offices and institutions began to feel the pinch through their day to day experience of facing increasing attacks on their democratic rights and livelihood. And there started gradual erosion of Left vote base.

However, to ensure victory as well as an increase in vote margin, the election machinery of the party built over the years was put into operation. One witnessed the beginning of this practice by the CPI(M) from the Calcutta Corporation Election held in June 1990. And the machinery worked from day one of the beginning of election process i.e. from scrutiny and preparation of the voter list, to the last day of election i.e. manipulating the votes inside and outside the booth using brute muscle power of the party goons. It worked effectively in all stages of election from Panchayet to Parliamentary till 2006.

Distancing with the people increased further when the party and the government headed by Jyoti Basu introduced New industrial policy for the state (in 1994) in tune with New economic policy of Narsima-Manmohan duo at the centre(1991).

And the people experienced its distressful effect when thousands of Kolkata pavement hawkers (who are hand to mouth) were evicted (without any provision of their alternative livelihood) over-night with the use of brute force by the combine of party goons and state police to give a face lift to the city of Kolkata to provide a red carpet ovation to the visiting team of 52 British big corporate houses under the leadership of John Major—the one time British Prime Minister. It was followed by the govt. order (1997) to put on hold the distribution of vest land to the landless peasants. This was done for conversion of this agricultural land to real estate and also to hand it over to big corporate houses—domestic and foreign.

On return from Indonesia in August 2005 after signing a MoU with Salim Group of industries—a big corporate house of that county, a puffed up Bhddhadeb thundered —Either Reform or Perish, echoing erstwhile British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's imperialist utterance on the floor of British House of Commons in 1990—There Is No Alternative (TINA).

The huge victory in the election (in terms of seats as percentage of vote dropped compared to 2004 LS election) prompted the Buddhadeb govt. and the CPI(M) top leadership to go all out for implementation of liberal reforms in the name of "Industrialization and development".

To utter dismay and disbelief of a vast majority of pro-Left Front people—the govt. and the party armed with colonial land act of 1894 went for forcible acquisition of multi crop yielding agricultural land in Singur for the TATAs and then in Nandigram for SALIM groups with bullets and brutality. What happened afterwards is known to all.

Thereafter the state witnessed one after another wide-spread movement on issues from Rezanur Rahaman's death to long-standing corruption in rationing system and police firing in Dinhata and afterwards NETAI killings in Jungle Mahal by the CPI(M) goons in collusion with Buddhadeb govt.'s subservient cops. The phenomenon brought back in one's memory the people's spontaneous upsurge in the state in 1966 over food crises. In truth food movement created an enormous support base for the left.

Mamata Banerjee who was still nursing the wounds from her successive election drubbing first in 2004 Parliamentary election (sliding down in strength in LS from 9 seats in 1999 to 1 only in 2004) and then in assembly election (2006) from 60 seats to 30, took the ever fuelling anti-CPI(M) situation as heaven sent. She intervened and became successful in channelising the direction of the course of political

developments in the state since the post-2006 Assembly Election in her favour and she began to reap rich harvest in one after another elections beginning from that of Panchayet in May 2008 to the assembly election in 2011.

GOVERNING AND ADMINISTRATION

The shift in CPI(M) party policy had its component effects on the policy direction of the governance of Left Front govt. Thus the promise made at the initial stage that the left Front govt. would not be run from the high top of the Writers' Buildings but would go to the people and work taking them into confidence began to wither away gradually, particularly from the beginning of 1990. Instead of de-centralization of the power there began more and more concentration of power in the hand of bureaucracy. To be precise from that time on it was not upon the people and grassroots party leaders, but on a section of subservient and corrupt bureaucrats and high police officials that the Left Front govt. began to rely on more and more for not only running the govt. but also for framing policy matters and programmes.

The first casualty was the cause of the people and transparency of the govt. Nepotism and party loyalty became the sole criteria for getting the important post in every sphere of the government and semi-government offices and institutions adversely affecting the efficiency in administration—from police to public welfare. Politicizing of the administration was done to such extent that people used to say—the local police stations have become the branch offices of the CPI(M).

Perhaps worst victims of party diktats are the state health and education system as well as transport system. Merit and efficiency were given a go by in running these departments.

Deep rooted corruption pervaded in all layers of Panchayts and it began to be nakedly exhibited in distribution of funds to the needy through various central and state schemes like widow pension, old age pension, BPL schemes etc.

In the industrial sector existing sick and closed industries including the tea industry were left to the mercy and whims of the profit mongering employers. Existing labour and industrial laws were allowed to be impudently violated by the employers at the cost of the worker's interest. The list of the closed mills and factories lengthened. It includes big and medium size engineering and jute units in organized sectors and tea in agro industries sector. And the land area of these closed mills and factories became the most lucrative site for real estate business to patronize the party—loyal promoters while the retrenched and laid-off workers had to languish in starvation with their children and wives.

In short, what positive was achieved (however limited) for the common people during the first one decade of the LF govt. was set on the process of the reversal with the submission of the CPI(M) to New economic policy.

ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

Long stay in governmental power has made most of the CPI(M) party leaders from top brass to those of branch level, power intoxicated. They took the people granted and to them LF govt. seemed to be a permanent feature. They resorted to muscle power and money power to put under control their respective locality. This anti-Marxist approach gave birth to local satraps (equivalent to Bengali version of Dapute Neta) in innumerable number. With the scant regard to communist values which were once valued most in the undivided communist party, these party leaders indulged in lavish life style blurring the distinction between communist culture and Congress-TMC or BJP culture. All of them amassed huge amount of unaccounted money through corrupt practices. They became arrogant and high handed in their dealings with the common people and would browbeat any sign of dissenting voice as they controlled both the local thanas and the local thugs.

SUPPORT OF A SECTION OF BIG CORPORATE HOUSE AND MEDIA

Following Singur and Nandigram the CPI(M) received worst ever drubbing in parliamentary election since 1977. And it sent a message to a section of big corporate capital both domestic and foreign that win in assembly election 2011 for the CPI(M) and the LF govt. it headed, became uncertain. And their obvious choice as a substitute for trusted pro-big capital and pro- imperialist Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and his party CPI(M), was Mamata Banerjee and her TMC, another pro-big capital and pro imperialist political force, an offshoot of their trusted class representative Congress(I). The phenomenon is much to the similarity of the phenomenon of the BJP emerging out and accepted by the ruling class at national level as an alternative to Congress(I) when the latter suffered wide scale loss of support base and met with defeats in one after another election from 1996 onwards.

Mamata Banerjee had by the time proved her ability in galvanizing the simmering resentment and anger of the people against CPI(M) into a potential force in favour of her and secured huge victory in successive elections from panchayet to parliament. Her victory in 2009 parliamentary election enabled her becoming the second big partner of the Congress-led ruling UPA 2 govt. at the centre. And she herself became an important Cabinet Minister with the portfolio of Railway Ministry.

And assuming the new portfolio Mamata Banerjee sent her clear message anew to the big corporate world about her continued adherence to liberal reforms and market economy—first by introducing P-P-P (public private partnership) scheme in railway projects and then fielding ex-FICCI Secretary in the election. To further prove her allegiance, she fielded retired bureaucrats including the ex-chief secretary—of the state along with half a dozen retired police chiefs in the election. Many among the candidates have dyed their hands with the blood of the activists of the opposition parties including communist revolutionaries while serving either under the erstwhile Siddhartha Sankar Ray govt. or the CPI(M) led govt.

These moves on her part assured the FICCI and CII bosses that Mamata Banerjee would tread along the path of economic reforms chalked out by her ex-masters viz- Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee as well as the present one Manmohan Singh. And the corporate world helped her in every possible way.

An alliance (better to say seat adjustments) between TMC and Congress despite some initial hiccups helped stop split in opposition vote and for the first time since 1977 the Left Front and for that matter the CPI(M) had to face an effective unified parliamentary opposition in any assembly election. It added to the cause of Left Front defeat. For instance in almost one to one contest with TMC in 171 constituencies CPI(M) could win 27 seats while TMC got 144. Again, in a similar contest with Congress in 32 constituencies CPI(M) could win 10 seats while Congress won 22 seats.

Because of the absence of any effective presence of the struggling left and the CR forces there developed a political vacuum in providing effective leadership to directing the course of spontaneous protest movement in Singur towards developing to a wider mass movement Mamata Banerjee seized the opportunity of this situation. Publicising her Familier diehard anti-CPI(M) and rebellious political image, she made her presence in Singur projecting herself as the leader by natural choice of the movement—herself bearing the brunt of police atrocities along with other agitators of Singur. And with a deft handling of the situation with the articulation of ruling class parliamentary politics became successful in transforming the character of mass initiative of the movement to that of individual initiative by shifting the stage of the movement, from the fields of the Singur to Dharmatala in Kolkata where she staged her fast unto death programme under the full glare of publicity.

In Nandigram the spontaneous resistance movement of the people belonging to different social strata against the proposed chemical hub attained a greater dimension following widespread people's protest movement throughout the state in the aftermath of the 14 march genocide. Undoubtedly the movement

acquired the potentiality of developing to a further height assuming the character of anti-SEZ and for that matter anti-imperialist movement.

In this context also because of the absence of any effective presence of CR forces and betrayal by some ML groups to the movement—Mamata Banerjee managed to make her entry into the movement and gradually established her unilateral leadership pushing aside other participating political forces with overt and covert support from the Maoists. Some ML groups who following an opportunist line joined Mamata's motley brigade and acted as an initial link between her and the Maoists. Their joining with Mamata along with the SUCI helped Mamata as it allowed her an added space among a section of Left minded Urban middle class intelligentsia who openly campaigned in favour of Mamata giving her a much needed wider political space in the election as a savior of the oppressed.

With some big corporate backed media houses rendering her necessary help Mamata Banerjee having a past history of sufferings and humiliations including beating on various occasions in the hands of the CPI(M) emerged out as the symbol of sympathy and support to helpless and hapless victims of Nandigram and Singur - which in turn following the natural course of subsequent political developments put her at the centre-stage of contemporary state politics as the obvious choice for giving the leadership in the election battle for a change against a regimented party like CPI(M) that has along with other Left Front partners an estimated strength of more than 3 crores mass front members in addition to more than one lac party members.

MAOIST SUPPORT

Even before the start of the election process the Maoists came out with open support for Mamata Banerjee.

In an open letter to Mamata Banerjee signed by their leader Vikram Maoists urged Mamata "to save Bengal".

Maoists' support to Mamata Banerjee in the assembly election is the application of the old tactical line of the Maoists. They have been practising it for a long time in Andhra Pradesh some times to the advantage of the TDP and the other times to the advantage of the Congress. In West Bengal they practised the line earlier and helped CPI(M) during the period of 1999 - 2001 to wipe out BJP-Trinamul combine from the Jungle Mahal area. It helped CPI(M) to strengthen their position in the area and they reaped rich harvest in successive elections till 2006. But the CPI(M) took a very hard stand and did not yield an inch of ground in the area to the Maoists. As their political equation with the CPI(M) changed Maoists, opted for a new equation with the TMC.

USE OF RAILWAY MINISTRY

A very shrewd handling of railway department helped Mamata Banerjee a lot to add her popularity and to expand TMC support base in rural Bengal, particularly in North Bengal by introducing a good number of local and long distance trains (bothering least for the existing infrastructure of the railway including the capacity of the railway track) providing easier and additional rail connection with different parts of North Bengal as well as with other parts of the state. Along with other factors the use of railway help Mamata and her alliance. It also helped her to increase her tally in north Bengal where earlier TMC had some footholds only in some pockets of Coochbehar and south Deenajpur.

PERSONAL ATTACK AGAINST MAMATA

A distinctive feature of this election is the massive turn out of voters. A large section of them are women voters and many of them went to vote after a long time. Foul language freely used against Mamata - a Mahila, by different CPI(M) leaders at different times particularly during election campaign prompted many of these voters to vote for Mamata as a mark of protest. So personal attack against Mamata backfired.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESULT

Common people do never support liberal economic reforms despite the well articulated publicity stunt be it by Congress - BJP or by the CPI(M) and its Left partners. As they have learnt through horrifying experience of their day to day life that the reforms policy and programmes are ruinous to them as it initiates a rootless, ruthless and jobless growth that evicts them from their home and hearth and makes their life most insecure and uncertain.

With no other alternative before them they give vent to their protest through ballot box to punish the ruling party or the ruling alliance responsible for the disaster by voting them out of power. They want a respite however limited it may be from the hounding fear of loss of occupation, of loss of jobs, coupled with the loss of whatever limited democratic rights to live they still enjoy. This is what the country is witnessing in successive elections since 1991. In 1996 general election people outright rejected Congress(I) along with its pro-reform slogans - "every rupee earn from reforms is a rupee gained for development". BJP led NDA which emerged out as the alternative to the depleted strength Congress met with same rejection in 2004 along with its slogans of 'India Shinning' as a punishment for their implementation of second generation of reforms.

The CPI(M) exit in West Bengal is a further addition to this list of people's rejection of reform programme and policy.

Exploiting anti-CPI(M) feelings among the large section of common people belonging to different social strata—a calculated campaign has been launched against the left politics in general and Marxism in particular by the TMC led alliance that includes SUCI and some offshoots of ML groups. "LAL HATO DESH BACHAO" is just one manifestation of it.

It is to be noted, in the context, that while the anti-Marxist forces, have launched ideological and political onslaught on Marxism from outside it is the degenerated CPI(M) by their misdoings and crimes against common people coupled with their submission to imperialist globalization has done irreparable damage to the cause of Marxism. □□□