

# THE MEDIA & THE LEFT FRONT

**Bibekananda Ray**

From day one in 1977, when the coalition of six leftist parties came to power in West Bengal, it did not have, on its side, sympathetic print or electronic mass media. This made the CPM launch its own organ, *Ganashakti*, a daily newspaper. From a humble start, as the Front's rural base expanded, the organ's circulation increased gradually and became a kind of daily party pamphlet, very different from most other newspapers, published from Kolkata and other cities. Its readers were committed CPM-led Front supporters who believed every word of it and took it as sacrosanct as the Vedas. The highly critical stance of major English and Bengali newspapers to the Front government never abated in the next 30 years, which Front leaders attributed to the so-called bourgeois reaction to inroads of Marxism in a capitalist country, as occurred in every other country or State, which embraced communism. Thus, in West Bengal a schism occurred and gradually widened among readers of newspapers- those who read *Ganashakti* and those who did not. This also accentuated the division in the society between the supporters and critics of the Front government. Eventually, this led to internecine strife between the supporters and cadres of the Front's largest party, the CPI (M) and those of the Trinamool Congress and the Congress, the two largest opposition parties in West Bengal.

It was the forte of the Front to bulldoze all opposition and criticism of the media to do and undo whatever was possible. The opposition parties were gradually reduced to a shamble with carrot and stick and its overwhelming victory in six consecutive Assembly elections emboldened it to ignore the hostile media *pace* its glib practices of democracy. By doing so, it behaved, ostrich-like before a sandstorm but the gust could never blow it away, because by fair means or fowl, it secured majority in all Assembly elections and in most *panchayet* polls across the State. Never before in Bengal's history, the society was so politicised and divided between the supporters and opponents of the Front. Inter-party strife became common and took a heavy toll of lives and property of the Congress and TMC supporters, mostly by armed CPI (M) cadres, in places like Keshpur, Garbeta, Bhaja Chauli, Khejuri in two Midnapur districts. To all these the independent media protested and exposed the hidden designs and agenda of the Front government but could not affect the poll results. There were widespread charges of rigging which became subtler day by day to earn the TMC leader, Mamata Banerjee's charge of 'scientific rigging'. Never before in independent India's history, was the media practically ineffective in reining or dislodging a despotic government swearing democracy but indulging in Goebbelsian propaganda.

Was the media really 'bourgeois' in opposing the Establishment and tearing its policies and activities to shreds? The media played a similar role after censorship was withdrawn following the end of Emergency in 1977 and hastened the fall of Indira Gandhi's government. In West Bengal for 30 years from 1977 the media

was like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. The brainwashing of the electorate through the *Ganashakti* and propaganda by CPI (M) leaders was like that by the King of Diamonds in Satyajit Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980). Although the opposition parties and independent candidates together polled nearly half of the votes cast in six Assembly polls, they could never form a majority because of disunity and failure to forge a united stance. After the seventh poll in 2006, the CPI(M) admitted that half of Bengal's over 8.5 crore people were not with them and advised its party cadres to wean them over.

The Front did try to muzzle the media through fair means and foul. The Marxist trade union outfit, CITU tried to disrupt the circulation of a major English daily from Kolkata; recently CPI (M) supporters beat up a reader of the bold and outspoken daily. A college in Barasat banned the circulation of its Bengali edition among teachers. Among the plethora of daily newspapers, only three major ones are consistently anti-Establishment but have not been much effective in weaning away the CPI(M) supporters from its leaders' propaganda and one-sided news in the *Ganashakti*. It however goes to the credit of the Front government that it hardly persecuted or harmed news persons and writers in anti-Establishment newspapers and magazines and never imposed censorship.

Is the media really blind to the Front and like the one-sided deer of the *Panchatantra* sees virtue only in the opposition and none in the government or in the Front? It has to be said that from this criterion, the three major Kolkata dailies—two in Bengali and one in English—are rather unbalanced and short in credibility. Realising the nuisance potential of the anti-Establishment media before the 2006 poll, the CPI(M) reportedly launched two new TV channels and won over an existing one by carrots of administrative facilities and concessions. The largest circulated Bengali daily, probably of India's too, did a clean volte face before the poll to the surprise of its over a million readers. It predicted a thumping return of the Front to power for the seventh time, despite rigours of the Election Commission which staggered the polls across a month and took unprecedented measures to prevent rigging. When some six months later, the government adopted draconian measures to forcibly acquire some 1000 acres of fertile, multi-crop land in Singur in Hooghly district, curiously it took the government's side, entailing a huge loss in its circulation. Recently, it seems to be returning to its traditional anti-Establishment stance.

All pet theories of media's impact on the society are proving wrong in West Bengal, so deep is distrust of them in a sizeable section of readers and watchers, not because they are indulging in untruth and propaganda but because their clients have been so thoroughly brainwashed by the ruling parties. Not only the common people, the bulk of West Bengal's intelligentsia and creative people in literature, theatre, cinema and other arts has been immunised against independent media. A world-famous film-maker, noted for his sympathy for have-nots and a celebrated cine and stage actor refused to sign a memorandum of protest against the police brutalities in Singur in the last week of November '06 while trying to acquire 997.11 acres of land for the Tatas' small car and

components factories. In his youth, the film-maker, then a member of the CPI, joined an orgy of Marxist protesters in burning trams in Kolkata for raising fares by just one paisa. The intelligentsia in schools, colleges, universities and other State and private offices and organisations have been emasculated and rendered mute and spineless by threats and denial of creature comforts. It is difficult to believe that they are cultural descendents of Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, Arabinda Ghosh and a plethora of followers of Mahatma Gandhi and secret rebel societies who could never be quietened or bought over by the British Raj in Kolkata and Delhi, just a century ago. This reveals the fall and decline of Bengali society in the last 30 years under a communist government which is a contradiction in terms in a democratic federation. ❄❄❄