

Calcutta Notebook

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The massive defeat of the Left Front and its principal partner, the CPI(M), has been the subject of discussion everywhere and articles are pouring in the daily newspapers regularly trying to analyze the defeat from various angles. Buddhadev Bhattacharya has lost his seat to a person who rose to the position of Chief Secretary of West Bengal Government, and if the continued and largely true allegation of continuous *daltantra* (party-ism) against the CPI (M) has to be accepted, this candidate, who once served as a trusted 'public' servant of the Siddhartha Ray regime, later showed enough loyalty to Alimuddin Street to gain its confidence. The defeat of Buddhadev Bhattacharya notwithstanding, the debacle of the Left Front cannot be compared with the drubbing the Congress received in 1977 in West Bengal. Siddhartha Shankar Ray, the outgoing chief minister of West Bengal did not dare to contest in the polls, so disgraced he was by the time the assembly polls were taking place.

Ever since the 1990s the CPI (M) had been gradually losing its mass base, but managed to retain its vote banks by relying more on its party machinery, rather rigging machinery and muscle power and administrative influence. They paralysed the police apparatus and used to utilise it as one of their party affiliate. The masses, although aggrieved very much, did not always muster enough courage to revolt.

This was a gradual process that took a marked leap forward with the events of Singur and Nandigram. And the final blow came after the Netai carnage. It is intriguing that the ideologues of the Alimuddin Street, who had persistently claimed to have effected decentralization of power through the panchayets did not bother to consult the local gram-panchayets, most of which were controlled by their own party men, on the issue of land acquisition. The way the state government and the CPI (M) dealt with the people of Singur and Nandigram raised indignation all over the state, and those who had earlier suppressed their grievances about the government and the principal ruling party began to speak much more volubly. Mamata Banerjee, it may be said, personified the grievances of the people, although it will require a considerable amount of work to find out how many of her candidates in the election were participants in the movement against land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram. It may be argued that the electorate voted for a change and for Mamata Banerjee, not necessarily for these candidates. She and her party took full use of the rising tide of popular unrest.

If the surmise that the events of Singur and Nandigram were crucial to the downfall of the left front is correct, it should be accepted that it was the policy of wooing the big corporate giants, Indian as well as foreign, has been defeated. As is well known, Manmohan Singh is the principal exponent of this policy in India, although in the immediate aftermath of the showing of first symptoms of world-wide recession, he told a lot of lies so as not to stultify himself. Buddhadev Bhattacharya, after the victory of 2006, thought that he could easily implement this policy in West Bengal. That he miscalculated the people's side of the equation is now well proved. Buddha Babu and his party wanted to justify this policy in the name of 'development' and 'industrialization', but the owner cultivators, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers of Singur and Nandigram took this policy as a threat to their livelihood. One section of the owner cultivators of Singur took the compensation money, while the other did not. One can also recall how in the wake of the first mass upsurge in Nandigram and the barbaric episode of 14 March, Manmohan Singh's government stood by the Left Front Government of West Bengal. Now the alliance between the Trinamul Congress and the Congress is going to rule, and it is very much doubtful if Mamata Banerjee will try to find out

and implement an alternative programme of development, albeit she made it clear after taking office that unwilling farmers of Singur would get back their land.

The mood of some newspapers is also interesting. One leading Bengali daily, immediately after the first upsurge in Nanigram in January 2007, called it anti-industrialization chaos (*silpayan birodhi tandab*). Right now it has called the victory of the rightist combination a green revolution (*sabuj biplab*). The way Mamata Banerjee and his party have behaved recently—consider their role in the case of the Nuclear Liability Bill—does not hold out much expectations for the people in general. Of course large reactionary interests and big money bags will try to flock to her, and if the present is any indication, there will be no dearth of self-seeking careerists who will want to achieve importance by being epiphytes on her. □□□