

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

AFTER THE EUPHORIA, pro-'changers' would do well to understand that there was a definite swing away from the CPI(M), no doubt, but its vote-banks, though under siege, cannot be said to have collapsed.

The CPI(M) axis ended up with 41% of the votes polled, while the TMC and its allies pushed up their share to 49%. The BJP managed to tote up 4% of the votes polled, even in this polarized situation, an occurrence to be noted.

The systematic fall in the popularity of the CPI(M) and its axis is shown below.

Year	2006	2009	2011
Total votes	1,98,00,148	1,84,76,369	1,95,52,816
Vote share	50.2%	43.5%	41.2%
Seats won	235	99	62

Of course, lies and deception have become the staple propaganda of the CPI(M), and it is seeking to comfort its supporters by putting forward the overall increase of 11 lakhs in the votes cast in favour of their axis between the 2009 lok sabha elections and the present exercise. Actually, there was an overall increase of 48 lakhs in votes cast between 2009 and 2011, partly due to the enrolment of 37 lakhs of new voters, and partly due to increased turn-out of voters. The pitiful fact is that of this additional number of votes cast in 2011, only one-fourth (-23%) went to the CPI(M) axis and three-fourths (-72%) went to the TMC and its allies. If anything, this shows the further erosion in the popularity and credibility of the CPI(M) in 2011. The problem with systematic lying is that one tends to be hoodwinked by one's own lies.

The CPI(M) has taken a mauling, no doubt, admitted by everyone excepting the CPI(M), but it still retains a significant hold over a large section of the people of West Bengal.

Let us start with the scheduled castes of Rarh Bengal, from the districts of Bankura, Purulia, Bardhaman, Birbhum, and west Medinipur, the heartland of the militant Bauri and Dom-Chamar people. The bastion has been breached and the TMC combine has captured -15 lakh votes and 10 seats. But, the CPI(M) axis retains the loyalty of more than another 15 lakhs, perhaps a lakh more than its enemies, and 11 seats. Not ousted, no sir.

Next one may look at the fecund mud lands of Howrah, Hooghly, and south 24 Parganas, the abode of the hot-headed Bagdi and other scheduled caste fisherpeople, shared with the Dulay and the Namasudra. Here, the CPI(M) axis has fallen behind the TMC combine, the latter securing more than 18 lakh votes and 17 seats. The CPI(M) axis chalked up only 6 seats here, but wait, popular support to the extent of 16 lakhs was retained.

Nadia and north 24 Parganas have become the homeland of the scheduled caste of Namasudras, many being refugees from Bangladesh. The Matua cult holds sway here, and the wife of a cult figure, the greatly respected Boro-maa, gave her blessings to Mamata Banerjee. There seems to have been a splinter support for the CPI(M) in the next generation, but the younger son of Boro-maa won on a TMC ticket. Here the TMC combine took 11 seats to the 2 seats wrenched by the CPI(M), and more than 9 lakhs votes. But the CPI(M) was not abandoned, its axis retained more than 7 lakh votes.

In the northern districts of Malda, north and south Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, and CoochBehar, there is the Rajbanshi. Here, too, there was polarization, and the candidates sponsored by the Kamtapuri and Greater CoochBehar movement did badly, Atul Roy of the KPP polling a meagre 11,906 votes. Again, the two fronts were neck to neck at -12 lakhs, the CPI(M) axis, in fact, gathering a little more than the other. But, its axis had to be satisfied with 6 seats, while the TMC and its allies bagged 11.

Leaving aside the Santal and the Munda, the main tribe in the north is the Oraon. The other well-known tribe is the Bhutia. The CPI(M) axis led with 4 lakhs to the 3 lakhs of the TMC combine, yet each of the rival fronts won 3 seats. Among the Santal, the Mahato, the Munda and Bhumij people of the western districts (and two northern constituencies), the TMC and the CPI(M) fronts won ~6 lakhs each, but this time the former won 3 seats, while the latter ran away with 6. The Sandeshkhali seat, with a mixed tribal population, was won by the CPI(M) with 66,000 votes against the 62,000 of the TMC.

The upshot is that the TMC has taken the fight for votes right into the core of the dalit peasant support of the CPI(M), and has won away a little more than half the voting public. The hardest and most surprising wins have occurred in the Rarh districts. But, the CPI(M), even in this the nadir of its existence, has retained half. It is possible that some of this support might weaken in the immediate future as more people realize that it is not ordained anywhere that you cannot oppose the CPI(M), and all observe the uncorrected, aggressive, authoritarian stance of the unrepentant leadership. But the hard core of support of the poor which will still remain is a force to reckon with. Led by an intertwining of self-interest with the fortunes of the party not only of bad gentry and uppity rich farmers but also of people with less than average means and more than average cleverness fed by years of graft—the cadre, it is qualitatively different in character from the TMC support base (formed also of the poor) which came on a wave generated by an almost child-like belief in the integrity of that very Bengali (and Indian, too, for that matter) icon of the affect, the elder sister, against the rich exploiter—politician-sarkari babu nexus. It was a fight of the CPI(M) against Mamata Banerjee, with the corporates looking on (Interchange Manish Gupta and Amit Mitra. No body thinks the results would change significantly. In both cases it was Mamata who won). Rarely has more been expected of a leader, and if her party cannot live up to these expectations, the wave will start receding.

The moral is that the CPI(M) is down but not out. And remember, the corporates are waiting only for their spoilt child to learn a little manners. A Mamata who directly communes with the people is certainly not the favourite dream of Tatababu and his brethren, especially if the communion breaks out of fluffy good wishes and starts acquiring economic substance and political shape. Stranger things have, indeed, happened, but, alas, it is also true, not most of the time, and, then, too, only if the people are alive to the real issues at stake. Meanwhile the man eater licks its wounds.

One can safely say that there will be great disturbance in the east. It is a time to dress and not to loll. □□□