

OMINOUS SIGNS

Of Rule and Misrule

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BEFORE AND AFTER THE LAST assembly polls, one leading cliché of the campaign conducted by the Trinamul Congress and its leader was a reference to 'thirty four years' of misrule of the CPM-led Left Front. Those who habitually repeated this phrase forgot that in terms of performance and attitude to the people, these 'thirty four years', or seven successive terms of the Left Front Government were not uniform. When the Left Front Government first came to power in 1977, there was high expectations among the lower echelons of the people, particularly regarding the land reforms. In order to appraise the performance, one must take a look back. The Naxalbari uprising of 1967 created a wave of peasant movements throughout West Bengal. One of results of the wave was the historic movement for the seizure of crops in Gopiballavpur, till then a little known place of West Medinipur. The CPI(M), the CPI and other parliamentary leftist parties too could not ignore this wave and had to lead movements for seizure of ceiling-excess surplus land. During 1967-77, a large amount of land (about 6.62 lakh acres) was vested. In 1977, the total amount of vested land was a little more than 11 lakh acres. When the earlier Congress Government ruled West Bengal in 1971-77, the then ruling party did whatever they could to suppress this subaltern upsurge, but they too had to vest and redistribute some land. Till 2007, the total amount of surplus vested land was about 14 lakh acres and out of this, more than 11 lakhs were distributed. It should be noted that more than 6 lakhs had already been distributed when the first Left Front Government came to power. Hence the Left Front's persistent claim that they, while in power, distributed about 11 lakhs of surplus land is patently an exaggeration.

It is true that after the installation of Left Front in power, Mr Binay Chaudhuri, the then minister for Land and Land Revenue presented the programme of 'operation barga' i.e. recording of sharecroppers. But the act of 'operation barga' was actually framed during the earlier Siddhartha Ray period, ostensibly with the purpose of forestalling future outbreaks of peasant revolts, but the Congressmen of the countryside, owing to their vested interests, obstructed its implementation at every step. During 1978-1981, however, 12 lakhs of bargadars were recorded, and this success was achieved by the force of earlier peasant movements. But the names of a large number of bargadars were as yet unrecorded. During the acquisition of land by the government in Singur for the Tatas, this fact was laid bare. It was not an isolated example; throughout West Bengal, the names of many bargadars were unrecorded. Hence it is a stark truth that the government did not care to complete the task of *operation barga*. What did the government do? They held the peasant movement in leash. The principal constituent of the Left Front, the CPI(M), concentrated its attention on strengthening its hold by relying on a new affluent class consisting of rich farmers, service holders and new businessmen, many of them had earlier served the Congress. The outcome was a phenomenal growth of corruption, coupled with one party rule, and the gradual erosion of the gains achieved earlier. Whatever

was achieved by way of land reforms could be consolidated by means of various types of cooperatives, but the apathy of the government and the ruling party initiated a movement, in the reverse direction. From 1987-88 onwards the CPI(M) increasingly relied on muscle power and the police for maintaining its hegemony, and its practical isolation from the masses grew slowly and gradually. The revolts of Singur and Nandigram only signified a culmination of the process. The Trinamul Congress and its leader, Mamata Banerjee rode the crest of this wave and came to power. Those who supported Mamata were not all Congressmen or representatives of old vested interests, and a large number of well-meaning persons too wanted the CPI(M) to go. It is not an exaggeration to say that while some of them hoped for a greater space for independent pro-people democratic work, a considerable section nurtured an illusion about Mamata Banerjee and her government.

The second section is right now increasingly disappointed, and the credibility of the government in their eyes is fast moving downwards. A few examples may be given. First of all, the unofficial probes into the death of the Maoist leader Koteswar Rao, better known as Kishenji, have revealed that he was killed in cold blood, and Mamata Banerjee's talks as well as the claims of the police chiefs have not been taken by anybody interested in the subject. In fact, a leading daily and an eminent journalist who played an important part in promoting Mamata Banerjee against the CPI(M) have demanded a judicial probe into the circumstances of Kishenji's death, but this demand has gone unheeded. One farcical event occurred before that, inviting only ridicule. The place earlier known as the Esplanade East was renamed Sidhu Kanhu Dahar during the period of the Left Front Government. Sidhu and Kanhu were two brothers who led the historic Santal uprising, and the word 'dahar' means a strip of land. But the Chief Minister, while celebrating the anniversary of the uprising, asked if there was any descendant of Dahar Babu. These words evoked only fun and laughter throughout West Bengal. Then, the Chief Minister declared that she would transform the city of Kolkata into a city like London, and the Presidency College into world-class university. The Chief Minister was ostensibly ignorant of the fact that the growth of the city of London was inextricably bound up with the inflow of wealth from the colonies of Britain, and that her declaration would be realizable only if India could build up some colonies. Mamata Banerjee and her associates also displayed the same ignorance in failing to realize that the improvement of the Presidency College was bound up with the question of improving the quality of education in general in this state, and that even the whole of money of the Tatas or the Ambanis cannot create an archetype of Oxford or Cambridge or Harvard in Kolkata. One or two recent examples that have degraded the image of the Chief Minister mentioned in addition. Recently an Anglo-Indian woman was raped in a car, and the local police behaved discourteously with her. The Police Commissioner of Kolkata displayed his ugly face by suggesting that it was a concocted tale, and the Chief Minister echoed the version of the police chief. Then a TV channel brought the news before the public and the Deputy Commissioner of the detective department, herself a woman undertook an investigation. The result was the arrest of some culprits. Lately the Chief Minister has branded another incident of this type as an engineered episode, while a local leader of her party took the victim to the police station. And just on the eve of the general strike,

an ex-MLA belonging to the CPI(M) was killed in broad daylight in Burdwan, along with another person. The Chief Minister tried to dismiss the episode as a result of the internal contradictions of the CPI(M), while his party colleagues attributed the event to 'public anger'. Lawyers owing allegiance to the Trinamul Congress however stood for the accused. Rural Bengal is witnessing a phenomenon—many of the erstwhile CPI(M) supporters have been joining the Trinamul Congress. It is also interesting that one member of Mamata Banerjee's cabinet served the West Bengal College Service Commission as a university nominee and then as a Chancellor's nominee when the CPI(M) reportedly imposed its one party hegemony in the sphere of education. Another member rose to be the Chief Secretary during this period of ubiquitous 'daltantra' - it may be a matter of CPI(M) reportedly imposed its one party hegemony in the sphere of education. Another member rose to be the Chief Secretary during this period of ubiquitous 'daltantra'-it may be a matter of speculation how much he greased the palms of the Alimuddin bosses for his career advancement- and was a servant of the Tatas when the Singur agitation was going on. The present Finance Minister's stand on Singur during that turbulent period is well known.

It is no wonder that the present ruling party in West Bengal is already faced with a downward spiral. The idea is gaining ground that they have come to rule for five years only and their activists want to make a fortune of their own by using this short spell. Only future can judge whether this notion is correct, but the signs are ominous. □□□