

WEST BENGAL UNDER THE LEFT

1977-2011

Edited by
Rakhahari Chatterji and Partha Basu



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Preface

The Left Front government, a social democratic regime, served seven successive terms within an electoral democratic framework in the state of West Bengal between 1977 and 2011 and thereby created a record of sorts not only in the Indian context but in the history of parliamentary politics as a whole. Its early success was attributed to measures such as land reform and redistribution and consolidation of the Panchayati Raj experiment in democratic decentralization which drew wide attention in India and abroad. However, while the run of its electoral success continued unabated, signs of degeneration set in since the 1990s and the government finally – despite registering a dramatic win in 2006 under the new chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya – lost its way in the quagmire of Singur-Nandigram land acquisition controversy and collapsed in 2011.

The present volume attempts a comprehensive review of the Left Front regime's career under three sections. The first section titled 'Politics and Parties' concentrates on political developments: the backdrop of its emergence and overall performance; the factors of stability and facets of change; the trenchant critique offered by the left extremists; and the regime's response to the sub-national Gorkhaland demand in the northern fringes of the state. The second segment under the heading 'Politics and Policies' interrogates the government's major policy initiatives which covers urbanization, industry, agriculture, health and education and seeks to assess the fit between promise and performance. The third cluster probes the interface of 'Politics and Society' and deals with issues such as caste, community, gender, media and civil society. Finally, an Epilogue has been added to assess the political trends following the fall of the Left Front government.

The contributions have been made by experienced researchers and faculty members affiliated to several leading academic institutions of the state. The book is expected to cater to the needs of students, research scholars as well as interested members of the general public.



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1

Introduction

Rakhahari Chatterji

This book can claim to be the sequel to an earlier book, *Politics in West Bengal: Institutions, Processes and Problems* published in 1985. The earlier publication examined the decline of the Congress and the growth of the Left in West Bengal between 1947 and 1982. The present volume wants to take the story further focusing on the successes and failures of the Left in government leading to its dramatic decline towards the end of the first decade of the new century.

When in the state elections in 1977 negotiations between the newly formed Janata Party and the Left parties broke down, the latter decided to contest separately as the LF (Left Front) with much trepidation. For the big success of the Janata Party in the post-Emergency Lok Sabha elections had overwhelmed everyone. Yet the electors in West Bengal did not miss the opportunity to re-elect the Left and with a thumping majority for atoning the injustice done to it in the aftermath of the elections of 1967, 1969 and 1971 and during the elections in 1972. The people were happy in giving the CPI-M a healthy majority within the LF and in seeing Jyoti Basu, always considered the quintessential leader of the Bengalees, as the chief minister. The Naxal violence had abated, and the authoritarian elements within the Congress had been decisively humbled nationally as well as in the state. Bengal's left leaning intellectual ethos, liberal political values and a rich cultural tradition based simultaneously on rationalism, secularism, spirituality and religiosity expected the LF government with a strong popular mandate under the leadership of Jyoti Basu to restore peace and tranquility and initiate economic development through industrialization, rural reforms and generation of employment. There was cautious optimism all around.

This optimism sustained the LF for more than three decades despite the prolonged power shortages, frustrating industrial and employment situations, frequent bandhs helping no one, occasionally drowning into the dark pits as in the cases of Bantala molestation and murder, Marichjhanpi

atrocities, or murder of Anandamargis in broad daylight in the streets of Calcutta.¹ People had so much conviction in Jyoti Basu's leadership and in the CPI-M's incorruptability that they were ready to buy these as aberrations or as motivated propaganda by the bourgeois press to sully the image of the party. Hence, even if the allegations of vote rigging in elections were partially true, it does not explain the overwhelming proportion of votes and seats that the CPI-M and the LF were able to bag in election after election. These indeed were positive expressions of popular confidence in the LF led by the CPI-M.

Although between 1977 and 2006 in every election save one (2001) the CPI-M received absolute majority of seats in the legislative assembly, it took care to keep the Front as a coalition together though not without hitches, tensions, and severe strains in relationship among the Front partners. If this was good for appearance of some kind of left unity, it also helped the major party to keep serious electoral challenges at bay. The Congress despite claiming around 40 per cent of the electoral votes remained marginalized in the state, sometimes some of its leaders being accused of surviving at the sufferance of the CPI-M, shifting their locations, as it were, between the inner core and the outer skin of a watermelon, the reference being to the colour green of the Congress and red of the Left. The one leader who could throw a real challenge to the CPI-M, Mamata Banerjee, was kept in leash by the other leaders within the Congress for the better part of the 1990s either for their own reasons or for reasons of the national party which during that decade was under the compulsion of courting the CPI-M (and many other state parties as well) for survival against the rising threat of the BJP. In this perspective, much of the electoral success of the CPI-M, especially from the 1990s onwards, was by default. Had the party genuinely realized it, it should have directed its attention to organizational discipline like keeping its cadres under control, being in touch with the people, and not opening the flood gates to admit hordes of opportunists instead of flaunting its electoral success through arrogance.

Writing in 1991, Atul Kohli found West Bengal as the best governed state in India, for the CPI-M could provide political stability, marginalize political violence generated by casteist, communal and political extremist forces and bring commitment and capacity closer together.² This certainly was no mean feat after the decade of violence from 1967 to 1977. Through its most successful programme, "Operation Barga," it secured tenurial rights for the landless labourers in a labour-abundant agrarian economy.

The other flagship programme of the CPI-M-led LF government was to regularly hold elections for local urban and rural governments. Its attempt to reinvigorate the panchayati raj and to genuinely decentralize power through effective democratic participation at the rural level in favour of the poor was a remarkable idea. It also ensured that women participate in Panchayat bodies and assume more frequently decision making roles.

By repeatedly talking about ‘limited power’ of the state government within the federal and bourgeois set up in the country as a whole the party succeeded in minimizing popular expectations from the government. As the party in power while it governed it also resorted to mobilizational activities through periodically organizing strikes and bandhs against some anti-left conspiracies, or central government policies or capitalist and global imperialism which allowed it to keep the cadres active and mobilizational activity at the grass roots level going.

Operation Barga created a lot of positive enthusiasm for the Left Front in rural West Bengal producing a solid vote bank among the middle, lower middle and poorer sections and also among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes within the rural population. This vote bank helped the LF to weather variations in urban support over the years and proved to be a solid support base for the CPI-M until the beginning of the Singur and Nandigram campaigns of Mamata Banerjee. It cannot be denied that Operation Barga coupled with greater opportunities for participation at the panchayat level, apart from producing economic benefits, also gave a rare self confidence and sense of self respect to the rural poor. Yet the benefits of Operation Barga could not be sustained for long for the beneficiaries because it was not supported by making agricultural inputs available at cheaper prices or marketing of the produce easier for these marginal farmers. Reports started to pour in from the late 1990s that these farmers are selling off their lands for survival.

Decentralization of power and of development planning through invigorating the panchayati raj institutions at the rural level was supposed to be another major achievement of the LF government. The CPI-M, which came to power with support from urban middle class bhadralok, the refugees and to some extent industrial workers, realized that urban support base could be fickle and hence they must extend their hold on the rural folks to sustain them in power over the longer run. If “Operation Barga” helped them create this support base, decentralization through the panchayati raj institutions went to solidify and stabilize their rural vote bank.

It would certainly be a mistake to understand this as the only real motive of the CPI-M behind these policies. There is no doubt that the party was genuinely and sincerely interested in securing the interest of the rural poor and the landless. It stemmed from the ideology of the party as much as from the personal experience of rural leaders like Harekrishna Konar and Binoy Choudhury. So also was the case with decentralization of power through the panchayats. Yet, as we have already pointed out, the fruits of "Operation Barga" could not be sustained over the years in the absence of long term vision and ideological clarity. It failed to create a class alliance in rural Bengal which could be positively oriented towards the upliftment of the poor peasantry.

In the case of decentralization the initial enthusiasm was soon dissipated by the discovery of the rise of a new class of people representing the party and using the party connection as a structure for realizing personal ambitions. They were the rural party cadres supervising the development activities of the panchayats and disciplining the rural folks against any deviation from party line or party's dictats. These cadres, and through them rightly or wrongly the party, came to penetrate and dominate every aspect of rural life, the family or home life not excluded. Frequently, violence became the means for eliminating defiance or deviance. Thus, whether intended or not, decentralization of power in rural Bengal led to a decentralization of the powerful. If in the earlier times the power elite was concentrated in the capital city of Calcutta, now there were many smaller editions of the power elite spread through the villages generating fear and awe among the village folks. The omnipotent presence of the party cadres completely altered the chemistry of rural life: the self contained and bounded network of relations within a village became fragmented and connected with strings of power rooted in places unknown to the villagers. Simplicity and openness of the past were replaced by an overwhelming fear and a sense of dependence.

In contrast, urban life was more peaceful. The party's face here was in conformity with middle class *bhadralok* taste. Elections were more free and fair in Kolkata than in the villages. The party was more tolerant of criticism. It accepted loss of power in Kolkata Corporation elections more than once. The LF, after coming to power, ended the utter lawlessness in examinations at different levels of education to the great satisfaction of the middle class. The cadres were less visible in Kolkata and the party's control of the teachers' organizations, students' unions or government employees' associations was more sophisticated.

Despite the calm and the sense of security that the urban middle class appreciated and enjoyed, with the onset of globalization gradually a realization began to set in that the state was not doing much on the industrialization front or on the employment front. The spread of education was good, but the education was not of high quality nor was it tuned to creation of useful skill. The reduction in the number of years of English language teaching and a relaxation with regard to language teaching in general made the educated youths poorer in communication skill. Thus the spread of education led to heightening of expectations among the young in both rural and urban settings without making them more competitive in the job market. Despite Jyoti Basu cultivating good relations with the industrialists, apart from real estate, there was not much interest in making investments. The poor quality of urban infrastructure was certainly a major damper. Besides, despite the LF distancing itself from such working class agitational techniques as the gherao, it failed to enhance labour productivity or to promote commitment to work ethic and discipline. Gradually people began to feel that the CPI-M and the Left have probably developed power fatigue.

Buddhadev Bhattacharya, once installed as the Chief Minister, tried to instill some elan into the government, but probably it was too slow and too late. Arrogance of power became so overwhelming among both the leaders and the cadres that they increasingly isolated the people rather than communicated with them. They stood helpless as Tata's proposed investment in Singur instead of being projected as the dawn of second industrialization of Bengal came to be seen as the CPI-M's betrayal of the peasantry.

*

Many of the problems, shortcomings and weaknesses that the Left Front government, and particularly its leading constituent the CPI-M, was gradually becoming victim of were being pointed out at least from the mid-1980s by researchers and scholars. For instance, Partha Chatterjee in his regular contributions to *Frontier* magazine between 1984 and 1990 started to point out some of these problems which had potential of becoming insurmountable in course of time. Chatterjee, who maintained close touch with the developments especially in rural Bengal, of course conceded that compared to the 1960s and 1970s, there had been a 'qualitative change' in the 'attitudes and self-confidence of the majority of poor, landless, low-caste peasants in West Bengal villages' brought about by the panchayat institutions under the Left, yet found that it has failed to create a situation wherein the

rural poor could either demand right of subsistence or identify the new institutions of rural power as their own.³ He found, writing in March 1984, the state of the public sector so abysmal under the Left that 'it has had to make an offer, unprecedented in India, to private capitalists to take back some of the units now languishing in the nationalized sector.'⁴ Not only in the areas of economy or politics, even in the cultural field the Left was quickly losing imagination and creativity. Talking about political theatre, he found while allegations of favouritism and partisan bias were largely unfounded, '(J)ust as the workers' and peasants' or students' movements have lost their militant edge, in much the same way political theatre has lost its bite' which it was famous for in the earlier decades in Bengal.⁵

And strangely, he pointed out, there was no awareness of the debilitating forces creeping into West Bengal's politics on the part of the Left, especially, of course, of the CPI-M. The Twelfth Party Congress of the CPI-M held in Calcutta in 1986 found everything about the working of the Left Front government in West Bengal hale and hearty: '(I)f there were questions in the minds of the delegates regarding the future implications of some of the present policies, those questions have been effectively silenced, not by providing theoretically grounded answers to them but essentially by ruling out any theoretical discussion,' wrote Chatterjee.⁶

Similarly, Ross Mallick in his study of West Bengal drew attention to a self-critical inner party document prepared by the Burdwan District Committee of the CPI-M which was withdrawn from internal party circulation. This showed, according to Mallick, that the party was unable to admit criticism from whatever source.⁷ Mallick, in fact, pointed out how the party as well as the Left Front, working within a federal constitutional structure, fell in a bind, for it could not risk violence nor was it motivationally prepared for taking forward class conflict in the urban sector while its dependence on the middle peasantry prevented it from taking land reform measures to their logical end and politically organizing the lower classes in the rural sector.⁸ Even the efficiency of its implementation of reforms and development programmes, often introduced and supported by the central government, 'has been average at best, and more often lower than in most other Indian states.'⁹ Thus, Mullick observed, 'with neither socialism nor capitalism developing,' the CPI-M (and the Left Front) fell into the trap of winning elections for the sake of retaining power.¹⁰

In an article based on field survey conducted during 2003-05, Abhirup Sarkar argued that the flood of development that marked the onset of the

Left rule in West Bengal came to a halt in the decade of the 1990s.¹¹ He located the Left Front's long electoral success in the fact that the poor and the backward sections of the rural society have been consistently voting for the Left. The reason for their consistent support he found not in their economic gains, for there was hardly any; rather it was the product of their sense of gratitude for the dignity they had gained during the Left rule which they never had before.¹²

If Abhirup Sarkar was trying to understand the reason for the durability of the Left, Pranab Bardhan, in his contribution to the same volume tried to explain the reasons for the downfall of the Left Front in West Bengal.¹³ Bardhan argued that the collapse of the Left Front in 2011 was not primarily for the land acquisition issue. Rather it was the product of the regulative, oppressive and overwhelming presence of the Left Front, meaning essentially the CPI-M, in every aspect of the daily life of the people in the localities which the people came to consider as unbearable and unacceptable. While the party had created a mafia raj for the ordinary people, it lost control over the lower rungs of its own leadership. Its decentralization initiative failed to lead to spontaneous democratization of the rural society. The Front had patronized the unionized school teachers, health workers, clerks etc. such that without their mediation in no way people could get service in any of these arenas which legitimately they could claim. He also pointed out several areas demanding urgent attention which the Left Front had completely neglected. For instance, it did not find interest in organizing the unorganized and the informal sector in the labour market; its aspiration for monopolizing power led it to ignore the contribution to society and the economy that the NGO sector could make and left that sector, and associational life in West Bengal in general, unsure and impoverished; it did not consider co-operative movement as important; the Left's overwhelming dependence on the middle and small farmers made it impossible for it to organize the peasants on wage issues as that would directly hit the interests of the former; finally, when land acquisition became unavoidable for industrialization, it failed to identify and act upon modes of compensation which could be of long term benefit for the land losers. The Left failed to find a middle ground such that both industrialization and rehabilitation could proceed apace.

On the economic policy front Bardhan felt it was barely essential for the Left to come out of the hypocrisy of rejecting liberalization and accept market capitalism as unavoidable. There is no two opinions about

market capitalism's many negative aspects. But the Left indeed had the option of mobilizing people on issues like uncontrolled inequality and the environmental damage that it produces, demands for rehabilitation of the poor, environment protection and macro-economic stability. Here also discovering a middle ground was needed which the Left could initiate but neglected to pay attention to at the cost West Bengal's long term economic and social development. As a result, not only was the Left Front no different from any other state government in India; in fact, its performance was inferior to many non-Left states.

Finally, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya in a recent study has comprehensively examined the performance of the Left Front government, especially in rural West Bengal where, incidentally, the signature as well as the epitaph of the Left Front were written, and has confirmed many of the above arguments with detailed evidence.¹⁴ He points out, while the CPI-M positioned itself at the centre of the rural society in Bengal, its support base, as seen from the composition of the panchayat bodies, were young males of higher social status and predominantly owner-cultivators and teachers.¹⁵ The limited character of social mobility that the Left could bring about was seen in West Bengal's static rank on the Human Development Index between 1981 and 1991.¹⁶ The CPI-M successfully retained its support for a long while among the lower castes, the poor and the Dalits through its ability to deliver material benefits to them without making 'a serious engagement with the inner structures of social hierarchy'.¹⁷ While the promise of reform which helped it to galvanize support in its early years gradually melted away, it became afflicted with 'bureaucratic habits', 'corrupt and accumulative tendencies' and the governmental institutions, losing their innovative sheen, 'became dated and ineffective'. In no time the people could see through the screen and 'the organic link between the reformist party and the local society began to disappear'. The people could realize, as Bhattacharyya argues, that 'the party had lost moral authority to represent them'. While any sign of association with the party was a mark of status and power in the past, now it came to be seen as 'intrusive, totalizing, and threatening for their newly sensitized autonomy'.¹⁸

In his detailed analysis of Singur and Nandigram episodes which ultimately became instrumental in bringing down the Left Front rule, Bhattacharyya finds no fault in either industrialization or in acquiring land, even fertile ones as that might be unavoidable for factories in West Bengal. What went wrong, according to him, was that the CPI-M chose to violate its

own earlier practice of 'a consultative governmental process' in which the local leaders and the local people were taken on board for implementing policies.¹⁹ The Left leaders now 'took the population for granted' and 'indulged in smug unilateralism'²⁰ leading to the complete loss of credibility of the local leaders on the one hand, and complete loss of public sympathy for the party on the other.

*

If 2011 elections brought disaster for the CPI-M and the Left Front in West Bengal, it marked Mamata Banerjee's fulfillment of a dream. She fought the elections in alliance with the Congress (I) and won for her own party 184 seats out of a total of 294 Assembly seats. And in 2016 elections, she surpassed her own record to win 211 seats without any alliance with any other party. This far outnumbers the highest tally that the CPI-M as a single party has ever achieved.

Of course, it is necessary to know why the CPI-M failed so miserably after 34 years of continuous rule, as the scholars discussed have done. But it is also legitimate to ask how was it possible for the CPI-M and the Left Front to survive in power for as long as they did.

Counterfactuality notwithstanding, I would like to argue that the CPI-M's (and the LF's) unexpected durability could have been terminated sometime in the 1990s had there been another party willing to replace it in power, something like what happens in Kerala or Tamil Nadu. But it could not happen because there was no other party genuinely interested to oppose them until the birth of the Trinamool Congress in 1997. In 1977 elections the vote share of the Congress (I) had dipped below 25 per cent but it swung back to 35 per cent in the subsequent elections in 1982 and it continued to remain in the neighbourhood of 35 per cent until 2001. But the state Congress(I) failed to translate this public support into legislative seats. In fact, the party was too fragmented, and unwilling to take on the ruling dispensation in a way that could bring about regime change. Rather they found greater comfort in remaining ensconced in their party positions with the CPI-M's covert support on condition that they keep Mamata Banerjee at bay. Despite being in the Congress from the 1970s and her stints as General Secretary of West Bengal Mahila Congress(I), General Secretary of All-India Youth Congress(I) or President of West Bengal Youth Congress(I) she was denied the office of the president of West Bengal Congress(I) and the opportunity to lead from the front. With her one point

agenda of removing the CPI-M from power she was the odd person out within the West Bengal Congress(I). Finding the opportunity to lead the state Congress(I) to that goal blocked forever, she decided to float her own party, the Trinamool Congress in 1997.

Indeed, Mamata Banerjee could sense that the enthusiasm generated by land reform and decentralization through panchayati raj in the 1980s had ebbed by the 1990s and a section of the public were thinking of change. Shortly after floating of her party, she achieved success in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation elections in 2000.²¹ More important than that, in the first state assembly elections that her party fought as a separate entity from the Congress(I) in 2001, she was able to capture 60 seats and 28 per cent of the votes, easily pushing the Congress(I) into insignificance with only 26 seats and single digit vote share (interestingly, the Congress(I) could not recover from that position until 2016 elections when in alliance with the CPI-M it could achieve around 12 per cent of the votes and 44 seats)²². Even though in 2006 she got half the seats she won five years back, her base of support had expanded further and she captured nearly 36 per cent of the popular votes—a remarkable achievement. There was clear indication that her TMC had occupied nearly the entire opposition space in West Bengal and the Congress(I) was completely marginalized (see Table 1). In the panchayat elections of 2008 which followed the Assembly elections she could really achieve a regime change in rural West Bengal, something which was unthinkable a few months back. Her shifting alliances with the NDA and the UPA, in 1999 and 2009 respectively, allowed her to become the central railway minister twice; but more than that, this gave her opportunity, on the one hand, to learn politics and administration more closely and on the other, to create an all-India standing for herself and her party as she was maturing into leadership.

Table 1.1: Major Parties in West Bengal Legislative Assembly Elections
Total Seats= 294

	2001		2006		2011		2016	
	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)
CPI-M	143	36.6	176	37.1	40	33.1	26	19.2
TMC	60	28	30	35.9	184	38.4	211	44.9
INC	26	08	21	05.9	42	09.5	44	12.3

Sources: *The Telegraph* 20 May 2016; Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government in Practice*, 214.

Through her many protests and agitations and through her many failures she was hardening as a leader with a single minded goal of occupying the Writers' Building, the seat of power in West Bengal. The CPI-M and the Left Front meanwhile, sat comfortably with the understanding that with a subservient state Congress(I) and with a central Congress depending on its support for ruling in Delhi there was no threat or challenge to its tenure in power in West Bengal. It decided to treat her movements as personal tantrums bound to disappear in utter futility; or simply as a law and order problem, and not a serious political challenge. It took public support for granted. It thought it had a moral right to define what was democratic and to coerce people if they do not spontaneously come forward in support of its definition of democracy and development.²³ With their rule sufficiently routinized and bureaucratized, with corruption eating into their vitality and popularity, with arrogance pushing them into isolation, the CPI-M and the Left Front were living in the paradise of the unthoughtful when the tragic drama began to unfold in Singur and Nandigram. The government's response lacked both political wisdom and moral responsibility. Mamata Banerjee's moment had come.²⁴

*

Of course, it is possible to point out many shortcomings, wrong or untimely decisions, faux pas and misdirected projections of the CPI-M and the Left while in power which led to their electoral decimation in 2009 and finally in 2011. Changes in personnel and policies of the central CPI-M also had an impact on the functioning and fate of the LF government in West Bengal. But at the end of the day one has to admit that no party in a system of competitive electoral democracy can or should stay permanently in power. As we have mentioned above, for close to two decades it was in power not by its own virtue or rather despite its many vices, only due to the absence of any effective challenge. It is true that while in power it suffered from the dilemma of being true to its ideological commitment of a revolutionary class party on the one hand and, on the other, becoming a liberal party with loftier intentions and better ability to provide a clean and effective government oriented to development than any other party available in the political market of West Bengal or even of India. Unfortunately, it ended up being neither. As a result, West Bengal, instead of being able to make a distinguished mark on the Indian political landscape for being ruled by the CPI-M-led LF government, fell back in terms of performance compared with many other states under the rule of conventional parties. For its

survivability in the future, the CPI-M will have to come out of this dilemma sooner rather than later. It has to unashamedly decide whether to occupy the liberal-left- secular space which increasingly fewer parties deserve to claim whether in West Bengal and even in India and which constitutes the most dangerous vacuum in India's political space as the most valued traditions on which our civilization is founded are coming under severe attack or it would remain confined to the Leninist-Stalinist model, which had utterly failed and aspire for the mythical space for a proletarian revolution.

*

In the following chapters the authors have asked questions like: how could the Left led by the CPI-M come to power in West Bengal and stay for so long? What were its achievements and failures? Does its rule, seen in the context of its policies and performance, mark it as a unique experiment in India's state politics?

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In chapter two, Apurba Mukhopadhyay and Partha Pratim Basu have drawn attention to the evolution of the CPI-M in power during the thirty-five years of its rule and has explained its electoral demise in terms of both the organizational deficiencies it developed and the ideological dilemma it faced. The external forces such as globalization further accentuated these problems and the party failed to cope with these. Amitabha Ray (chapter 3) examines the issue of Left extremism as a force opposed to the CPI-M, first in the form of Naxalites and then reincarnating as Maoists in the early years of the present century. He shows how the CPI-M failed to negotiate political extremism and allowed the Maoists to be lapped up by Mamata Banerjee's anti-LF movement to create a huge space for a successful anti-CPI-M agitation in West Bengal. In chapter four, Shibashish Chatterjee looks at the multiple drivers of regionalism in India. For West Bengal, he focuses on financial regionalism which is rooted in the state's demand for a fairer share of the national financial resources, and on cultural regionalism which embeds itself on one or more identity markers. While financial regionalism is a novel way of conceptualizing the state's tensions with the Centre, cultural regionalism within the state (sub-regionalism, if you may) for the last three decades has been most threateningly represented by the demand for Gorkhaland. Chatterjee has made a critical assessment of both the issues under the LF regime. Ambarish Mukhopadhyay in chapter five has discussed governance issues, reforms, problems of institution building and inclusive growth in urban West Bengal during the LF rule.

In chapter six, Srikumar Bandopadhyay and Partha Pratim Basu have turned their attention to the controversial issues relating to industrialization under the LF rule. They point out how the core problems creating hindrances to industrial development in the state, like poor infrastructure, low work culture, difficulties of land acquisition were ineptly handled leading the big industries to bypass the state. Partha Pratim Basu in his chapter on agriculture (chapter 7) draws attention to the achievements and limitations of the land reform programme of the LF government, the slowdown in agricultural output in the 1990s and the LF's attempt to revive agriculture through a new policy in 2002. He shows how it remained a 'muddled response' as a result of the LF's (and of the CPI-M's) failure to resolve the conflict between a pragmatic outlook dictated by globalization and the ideological stance it refused to jettison.

In the next four chapters the authors respectively examine the achievements and limitations of the LF/CPI-M's policies in the areas of health, education, minorities and women. If there were some achievements in all these areas, the LF itself created major roadblocks or failed to resolve some of the pre-existing ones. Compared to other states, the left government in West Bengal could not make any mark of distinction in these issue areas.

In chapter twelve, Nilanjana Gupta has looked into the origin and evolution of the CPI-M's Bengali organ, *Ganashakti* through the period of its rule specially concentrating her analysis on the issues in the election years. She points out the crucial role the organ played in the various campaigns that the party undertook and argues that it reflected the growth of the party itself. In the final chapter (13), Amartya Mukhopadhyay has examined the role of the civil society in West Bengal's politics both during the heyday of the Left and during the time of its decline. If the civil society was tamed and hegemonized by the Left in the earlier years, from the 1990s onwards it began to reassert itself, finally tying up with Mamata Banerjee's Singur and Nandigram movements. In the context of the experience of this rather long period the author asks how can the civil society avoid taming and cooption and yet play a positive role in society.

Endnotes

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 18. Ibid, 135-37.
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 20. Ibid, 207.
 21. www.elections.in/political-leaders/mamata-banerjee.html 2016.
 22. www.indiaongo.in/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election-results
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I
POLITICS AND PARTIES



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The Left Front in West Bengal: From Movement to Government

Apurba Mukhopadhyay and Partha Pratim Basu

West Bengal has boasted of a rich legacy of leftist politics going back to the pre-independence times and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Congress party's unilateral domination of the national scenario in 1967, the leftists became part of two United Front (UF) governments in late 1960s. It was, however, in the aftermath of the National Emergency (1975-77) that the state had its first Left Front Government (LFG), consisting of several left parties coalesced under the umbrella of the Left Front (LF) led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI-M] and headed by Jyoti Basu as chief minister. During its first term, the government, despite its notable accomplishments in the fields of land reform and panchayati raj, had to function under the shadow of the fear of being ousted through the instrument of President's Rule as it happened with the UF governments earlier. However, LF's winning spree continued unabated in the elections of 1980s and 1990s which earned it the distinction of being the longest surviving leftist regime in the democratic world. But its rule somewhat predictably started losing its sheen over the years, and its popularity as reflected in its electoral performance touched an all-time low during 1999-2001. After Buddhadeb Bhattacharya took over as chief minister in the new millennium, the Front's electoral fortunes improved considerably in the Lok Sabha elections of 2004 and the assembly polls of 2006. Yet before long Bhattacharya's ambitious development agenda got mired in the row over acquisition of agricultural land for industrial purposes which made Singur and Nandigram, the theatres of grim resistance put up by the potential land-losers, household names throughout the country. It also gave the opposition parties in the state – long in a state of utter disarray – a substantial cause to rally around under the leadership of Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee, and a fast-paced series of developments finally led to LFG's ouster from power in the assembly polls of 2011. This dramatic twist in its fate was hardly anticipated in 2006 when LF seemed to have regained the

confidence of the electorate with its convincing margin of victory; yet it is difficult to overlook the fact that the beginning of the end had started much earlier – otherwise the LFG fortress which looked invincible in 2006 could not have crumbled the way it did in 2011 in a matter of a few years. This article seeks to put the removal of the leftists from power in West Bengal in perspective through three sections, the first undertaking an assessment of LFG's performance in various arenas of governance, the second looking into the factors underlying the stability and continuity of the regime; and the third delving into the course of its final collapse.

Assessing performance

The premier achievements of LFG, as is well-known, pertained to the spheres of land reforms, and empowerment of the poor and the marginal through democratization of local self-governing institutions like panchayats (rural self government institutions) and municipalities, indeed long before the constitutional provisions inserted under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992. However, the land reforms undertaken by LFG were not the product of administrative fiat but the outcome of a long period of struggle by the peasantry and the social and political mobilization of the landless in the countryside.¹ LF deployed its peasant unions and, since 1978, village panchayat members to monitor the administrative procedures of land reform laws to scuttle the influence of the big landlord classes.² These reforms, further, were reinforced by administrative measures as well as augmentation of supportive facilities including extension of institutional credit, supply of modern inputs like HYV seeds, chemical fertilizers and of water (through government owned irrigation structures) to the beneficiaries of the programmes.³

Again, in the backdrop of this empowerment of the rural poor and the marginalized the panchayat institutions offered an opportunity for holding on to and exercising such power with regularity. In West Bengal panchayat elections had not been held for nearly two decades in many areas; and the village councils, traditionally run by powerful local families, used to arbitrate on village disputes. LF initiative instituted direct party-based elections to the panchayats which were tasked with drawing up development plans and distributing state and national funds⁴ which enabled post-1977 West Bengal to emerge as an example of 'pro-poor governance'.⁵ Moreover, the first decade of LF rule ushered in a more egalitarian Green Revolution than had taken place in most other Indian states and West Bengal, historically

plagued by famine, was arguably transformed into the rice bowl of India. The Union Government's poverty alleviation programmes were better implemented in West Bengal under close supervision of the party hierarchy;⁶ benefits of Food for Work and Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) reached the targeted populations; and panchayats played a key role in distributing central funds for building infrastructure such as roads and tube-well irrigation thereby generating off-season jobs.

Critics, however, pointed out that as far as land redistribution was concerned, the rate of vesting and distribution – bulk of which was completed by 1985 after which it tapered off – was hardly satisfactory especially in comparison with the record of the second United Front government (1969-71). The 'high' land ceiling, according to some scholars, was not helpful for vesting enough land for redistribution among the 'lowest classes' so much so that even Benoy Choudhury, former LFG minister for land and land revenue, could not hide his frustration and disappointment.⁷ Similarly, on LFG's flagship 'Operation Barga', the same West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 noted with deep anguish 'the rapid increase in landlessness among rural households, despite the continuing process of vested land distribution to pattadars' and mentioned that nearly 13.23 per cent of Pattadars and 14.37 per cent of Bargadars had been forced or induced to part with their land over time.⁸ Again, a study of non-land inputs into land reforms in the district of Burdwan, where the communists had a substantial influence, revealed that the Pattadars had a very weak connection with agricultural service institutions, that only 40 per cent were involved in the cooperative credit system, which in any case was in total disarray. It may be recalled that the first decade of land reforms under LFG derived its thrust and tempo from organized mass movements that kept both administrative officials and elected panchayat members on their toes. But 1990s saw a tapering off of the movement for land reforms and in areas where the CPI (M) or one of its coalition partners made a clean sweep in the panchayat polls and viable political opposition could not be built up against such dominance, political movements for land reforms dwindled over time.

Coming to the urban industrial scenario, one notes a mood of despair and gloom traceable to the variety of historical reasons responsible for post-Partition industrial stagnation and decay in West Bengal such as massive refugee influx, chronic food deficit, dearth of raw materials, adverse freight policy and other discriminatory measures of the Union Government which

further compounded the problems of poverty and underdevelopment.⁹ Under the circumstances, LFG adopted a pragmatic industrial outlook: while it rather predictably emphasized development of small and cottage industries as well as expansion of public sector enterprises, it did not call for ouster of the existing multinationals and big industrial houses so long as they reinvested the major part of their profits for generation of employment in the state.¹⁰ Further, trade union militancy was put on leash to ensure that there was no replication of the experience of 1967-69, and conciliation of the demands of labour and capital through collective bargaining was advocated to win over the confidence of the industrialists.¹¹ Yet the first decade of LF rule failed to arrest the declining tempo of industrialization, and performance of the public enterprises remained a major butt of criticism due to the government's inability to run these units either as profitable entities under a capitalist framework or as public services with the state subsidizing the loss.¹²

From mid-1990s, in the aftermath of the market-ward shift in Indian economy, LFG began to implement an investor-friendly industrial policy in West Bengal which aimed at dispelling the evidently entrenched perception of native and foreign investors about working class intransigence instigated by leftist-led trade unions. The 'impressive recovery' of industrial momentum during the latter part of 1990s, however, was 'not really due to improved performance of organized industry, since growth in certain sectors such as jute and leather has been counterbalanced by the relative slow down in other sectors such as engineering. . . ' but stellar performance of the service sector thanks largely to the explosion of the IT segment. Further, between 2000 and 2003, more than 11,300 new small-scale and cottage industrial units employing more than 36,500 people, came up in the state indicating that 'the combination of institutional changes and agricultural growth that occurred over the 1980s in particular, put greater purchasing power into the hands of rural masses, and this contributed to the expansion of rural industrialization.'¹³

On the other hand, the organized working class of the state not only gained precious little in exchange for restraining its militancy as the impact of globalization was mostly negative, squeezing job opportunities, freezing wages and drastically reducing the size of the workforce in various sectors of the economy. Further, the steady rise of the number of casual, informal and self-employed workers in the progressively globalized world called for a new organizing mode: since many of these workers functioned from

home rather than factories or offices, welfare benefits and general economic security mattered more to them than wage or job security; and citizenship rights had priority over workers' rights. But the leftist leadership failed to live up to this task – barring some localized pockets – largely because of their lack of appreciation for the contradictions within the labour movement, especially between formal and informal workers and the special organizational exigencies of the latter.¹⁴

Thirdly, LFG attracted solid and sustained support from socially marginalized population groups such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and yet LF regime failed to initiate a process of social mobility on the part of these communities.¹⁵ Their presence was rarely reflected in the top leadership of the Front or its leading component the CPI (M), and while their members were more visible in the gram sabhas (the lowest rung of the panchayat system) compared to earlier periods, there again they constituted part of a silent majority. Indeed, the leftist leaders' proclivity to attach primacy to 'class' prevented them from linking social marginalization to caste or other social categories and the solid support base the Front secured among the scheduled communities was attributed to the ample benefits the latter derived from the land reform policies.¹⁶ However, social reorganization project aimed at breaking the iron grip of upper castes over all relevant channels of political-cultural mobility not only received scant attention from the LF leadership. A look at the state's education scenario, following Bhattacharya, confirmed that the existing social divides were only being further solidified.¹⁷

Similarly, Muslims remained another source of consistent support for LFG often hailed for its remarkable success in upholding inter-community harmony and social peace and stability even during testing times such as demolition of the Babari Masjid followed by widespread Hindu-Muslim riots in 1993. But the report of the Sachar Committee constituted by UPA Government at the centre in 2005 brought out some stark facts in 2006 concerning the status of Muslims in West Bengal. Contrary to the complacent view of the leftist leadership, it revealed the appalling socio-economic plight of Muslims of the state so much so that even Muslims of Gujarat – which earned an ill reputation following the 'Godhra riots' in 2002 – were far better placed in matters of literacy, education and employment compared to West Bengal known for its communal fraternity.¹⁸ This embarrassing exposure led LF leaders to try desperately to win back the confidence of the Muslim community through a series of hurriedly announced measures

such as reservation in education and employment for the community under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category, enhancement of state grant for Madrasa education, formation of a Madrasa Service Commission, soft loans for small businessmen from the community, inclusion of at least one Muslim member in selection committees for various public jobs and so forth. But these steps apparently failed to attain their objective as Muslim support for LFG – which swelled during 1990s when sizeable sections of the community abandoned their long association with Congress in view of its failure to protect the vandalization of the Babari Masjid – progressively dwindled as was reflected in the panchayat, municipality, parliamentary and assembly elections between 2007 and 2011.¹⁹

Promotion of women's security, welfare and empowerment constituted yet another major accomplishment of the LF regime reflected, for example, in dowry-related issues, participation in panchayat bodies or promotion of self-employment initiatives. Women in West Bengal, irrespective of caste, class and religion, enjoyed greater security than their counterparts in most other states and reports of the National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, repeatedly revealed that violence against women was lowest in Kolkata, compared to other metropolitan cities.²⁰ To turn to the socio-economic welfare side, the early measures included expansion of the scope of West Bengal Social Welfare Advisory Board jointly financed by state and central governments charged with social work, rehabilitation programmes and vocational training; enhancement of widow pension; and extension of free legal services to widows, prostitutes and destitute women through the Legal Aid department. Again, from the outset there was an accent on providing, with central government assistance, loans to poor rural women to promote income-generating projects especially in small scale and cottage industries.²¹ Yet critics drew attention to scanty attempts made by LFG to restructure women's economic, political and social roles: for example, the association between women's propertylessness and social inequality was ignored; their limited inheritance rights under Hindu Law and Bengal's customs never questioned; land was redistributed only to the – usually male – heads of households and suggestions for giving joint *puttas* fell on deaf ears. Similarly, women were under-represented in panchayats and even after reservation of seats had been introduced, women hardly enjoyed functional independence with the sense of efficacy derived from political contestation remaining low.²²

In the realm of law and order, finally, LFG made a good beginning by putting an end to the chaos and violence – verging on urban warfare –

which originated during the turbulent 1967-71 and continued unabated during the Congress regime headed by Siddhartha Shankar Ray²³ (1972-77) while political prisoners long languishing in jails were set free as promised in its election manifesto.²⁴ But the government's record in upholding human rights came to be seriously questioned over the decades as custodial tortures and deaths, atrocities against women by the keepers of the law, instances of unlawful detention and police firing undermined the quality of democratic governance in left-ruled West Bengal.²⁵ The cases of murderous attack on senior UNICEF official Anita Dewan in 1990 who had reportedly detected huge embezzlement of funds/ relief materials; or the mysterious disappearance of Bhikhari Paswan, a casual worker of Victoria Jute Mill, Hooghly who was allegedly picked up by the police during workers' unrest in the factory in 1993 continued to remain unsolved.²⁶ Indeed, it was probably since the tainted municipal elections in Calcutta in 1990 (during which opposition leader Mamata Banerjee suffered grievous injury) and the post- (Lok Sabha) poll violence the following year that fierce intra-party feuds and turf wars became a regular feature of West Bengal politics which only reached its height after the Trinamool-BJP alliance posed a formidable challenge to Left rule in Bengal in late-1990s.²⁷

Thus, a survey of LF's record over time in various fields of governance reveals that it represented only a mixed bag of success and shortcomings –this statement applies even to those areas, such as land reform, uplift of the minorities and backward communities or women's empowerment, often highlighted as its major accomplishments. This naturally raises the question that how under these circumstances LFG managed to survive so long, to which we turn in the following section.

Understanding stability

To begin with, LFG carried the birthmark of political moderation: imperatives of running the government was prioritized over seizure of state power; and preservation of democratic institutions and use of state power for facilitating development with distribution was emphasized.²⁸ The second United Front (coalition) government of West Bengal (1969) – in which CPI (M) had a strong assertive presence – sought to implement a radical land reform programme with occupation of illegally-owned land by the landless actively encouraged by the government. It produced two consequences: it sparked off stiff resistance from large landowners, the dominant class in rural Bengal on one hand, and the Naxalite movement

on the other leading to the split between CPI (M) and CPI (ML), the moderates and the ultras.²⁹ Keeping in mind the history of this breakup, CPI (M), after coming to power in 1977, sought to maintain a fine balance between a 'revolutionary programme' and compulsions of parliamentary democracy which attracted the epithet 'reform communism'.³⁰ This strategy, as Bhattacharyya pointed out, brought it rich political dividends as those factions of the Indian left who fully embraced the parliamentary path (CPI) or who rejected it completely (CPI-ML) ended up being marginal players in West Bengal for several decades to come.³¹

Again, this political middle path followed by LFG enabled it to consolidate its hold over rural Bengal by striking an alliance with the middle peasants as against the erstwhile rural rich (traditional support base of Congress party) as well as the poor and marginalized sections (whose cause CPI ML claimed to project). The middle peasants were reformist rather than radical in orientation which prompted LFG to shun the motto of 'land to the tiller' which implied a radical redistribution of land, and concentrate instead on promoting through 'Operation Barga' the interests of the sharecroppers. This was a smart strategy which hardly evoked any backlash from the propertied farmers (the jotdars) who presumably had neither the support of the new government nor the resources to combat the middle peasants while gratifying the latter, wary of any move such as comprehensive land reform aimed to improve the condition of the marginalized at its expense, and in the process turned the reformist left into an invincible force in Bengal's countryside for decades to come.³²

It is interesting to note that while in the early post-Partition decades, the Bengal communists had a strong urban support constituency in the course of 1960s and 70s, as Chakrabarty observed, CPI (M) shifted its focus from the urban to the rural milieu and as a result, contrary to the bonding it developed with the middle rungs of the rural society, its government never really attained popularity among the urban middle classes.³³ True, initially some of the measures undertaken by LFG such as improvement of law and order, restoration of the sanctity of the educational scenario, implementation of enhanced pay packets for government employees, police personnel and school/college teachers were welcomed by the middle classes. Yet it did not take them very long to take umbrage at the seemingly irreversible deterioration of urban civic services and two things were often held responsible for this grim state of affairs: with a large chunk of the state budget being spent on salaries, increments, and pensions,