

Moral Betrayal of a Leftist Dream

A sense of public anger in West Bengal over Singur and Nandigram has not added up yet to a statewide agitation against the Left Front. The electorate is wise enough to recognise that there is no viable alternative as yet. But if the CPI(M) continues to be obdurate, public outrage may take desperate forms. Reactionary forces like the Trinamool and BJP are waiting in the wings – the first such ominous signs were evident in Singur and Nandigram.

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Once a political movement becomes an object of public hatred and derision, it presages the erosion of its base and forecasts the eclipse of its credibility. Sad to say, the Left movement in West Bengal is hanging under such a threat. We should not in the least undermine the serious challenge faced by the Left Front government there which stands on the threshold of a new direction of growth and faces choices of models to be adopted. But whatever choice it makes has to be embedded in probity and integrity. And it is in this respect that the Left has failed us. Nandigram is an example of one more betrayal on the top of the already high pile of disappointments.

The debate over the popular agitation and the state response in Nandigram has till now been confined mainly to three issues: (i) the conflict between the economic priorities of agricultural production and industrial growth; (ii) the way the state should handle it; and (iii) its human rights dimension. Notwithstanding the importance of debating these questions, it is urgent to foreground the more basic

concern – the decline in moral standards in Left politics over the last two to three decades which has eaten into the marrows of the Left movement and dragged it into the present quagmire.

When in 1977 the West Bengal electorate voted the Left Front to power with a thumping majority, they did not bargain for a communist revolution, but expected a clean and efficient administration that would carry out long awaited land reforms and meet the basic needs of the urban populace. Endowed with a legacy of struggle against exploitation and an image of sacrifice and honesty, the communists of West Bengal were supposed to set their government as a role model for other states. Today, after 30 years of continuous rule, the Left leaders of the state face the problem of re-establishing their credibility not only among their own constituency, but also in the entire country. The initial euphoria over the success of land reforms, the panchayati system and adult literacy programmes, soon gave way to scepticism when skeletons started tumbling out of the cupboard.

At the turn of the 21st century, it was revealed that only 15 per cent of the net arable land had been distributed in the

state. Even among those who received land, on an average 13 per cent had lost it by 2001, and the number of landless rural households increased from 39.6 per cent in 1987-88 to 49.8 per cent in 2000 (according to the West Bengal government's first *Human Development Report*). The *Human Development Report* of the Planning Commission brought to light far more devastating facts – in rural West Bengal 85 per cent of the population did not have pucca houses; women and children were more underfed and anaemic than in other states; 35.66 per cent of its population still remained below the poverty line – all these figures reducing the state to the 20th position in the list of 32 states and union territories in terms of the human development index. The government's tall claim of improving the lot of dalits and tribal people was also punctured soon when the Pratichi Trust, headed by no less a person than Amartya Sen, came out in 2002 with shocking revelations about the discrimination against students of scheduled castes and tribes in the primary schools of the state. As for the other Left proclamation of enhancing the status of the Muslim minority (which constitutes almost a quarter of the population of the state), the Sachar Committee found that its share in state jobs was only 4.2 per cent. We must add to this the dismal record of the government's failure to prevent closure of factory after factory, leading to unemployment and suicide among industrial workers.

One can, of course, endlessly go on arguing over the causes – whether it was the centre's "step-motherly" treatment in allocating financial resources, whether it was the Left leadership's failure to plan a long-term strategy of follow-up measures to bring about sustainable development, or whether it was the built-in structural hurdle in the capitalist system within which the Left had to operate. But curiously enough, despite all these failures, the overwhelming presence of the Left is all-pervasive in West Bengal, as evident from its ability to emerge victorious with the same thumping majority in every consecutive election over the last three decades.

Expanding Base, Shrinking Ideological Roots

Paradoxical as it might sound, it is this victory at the polls – "the never ending audacity of elected persons", as once described by Walt Whitman – that pulled the Left down to the depths of abominable

deceit and criminality that were witnessed in Singur and Nandigram. At face value, the Left – primarily the CPI(M) – had expanded its base in West Bengal. But it had been at the expense of ideological principles. The fibre of morality in the Left muscle has withered, and politics in West Bengal has been reduced to an arena for partisan manipulation.

The rot started with the CPI(M)'s using the administration to spread and consolidate its party base by selectively distributing largesse, and forcibly doling out plots of land to sections of the farmers and peasantry, who ultimately became their apparatchiki and retainers. This privileged segment of the rural population has emerged as a tyrannical force in the West Bengal countryside – bullying the villagers into accepting their party dictates, persecuting those who refuse to toe their line, extorting money in the name of collecting party funds, and assuming the role of the sole arbiter in any village dispute. In several cases, the landless followers of the party were settled on plots without any legal sanction, as a result of which the beneficiaries did not have any valid papers of ownership. Sharecroppers working on the lands of the CPI(M) farmers, instead of being registered, were promised fringe benefits in lieu of their due share of crops. Today, the disastrous consequences of such short-sighted and irresponsible measures are evident in Singur and Nandigram, where these villagers, without any legal documents to claim compensation for their plots, which are about to be taken away for industrial purposes, are refusing to part with their land and rebelling against the same party which had once helped them. Their limits of patience broken, the long intimidated villagers – both the deprived and the erstwhile beneficiaries – have come together to retaliate against the CPI(M). They are paying back the party in the same coin by driving out its cadres, burning their houses, and bludgeoning those who refuse to join them. Reports of atrocities suffered by CPI(M) cadres and of those by its opponents are being believed or disbelieved solely on the grounds of political predilection. But while our hearts go out to the poor CPI(M) followers who have been killed or driven out from their villages by their opponents, we must ruefully admit that the CPI(M) has to blame itself for meeting this sticky end. By its intimidating method of establishing party hegemony in the past, it created the insurmountable dissensions that are splitting the rural masses today.

It is the same unscrupulous method of establishing party hegemony that has corrupted to the marrow the entire administration and every institution of West Bengal today. Subservience to the local party apparatchiki (which includes regular payment of a fixed amount, described under the euphemism of “contribution”) is the criterion for the appointment of teachers in schools, obtaining a bed in hospital for treatment, or gaining access to facilities that should be available to every citizen in the normal course. The Left Front government has thus racked up a record of corruption and official lies in day-to-day governance, arrant duplicity and muscle power in politics, and crass partisanship in the distribution of benefits – a register which is only second after the score achieved by Congress, BJP, Samajwadi Party or other ruling parties. It is increasingly being felt in public perception that the Left is no different from these parties, when it comes to running the administration.

Loss of Moral Philosophy

While shelving the ultimate goal of building a socialist society, in its bid for immediate political gains in the competitive electoral race, the CPI(M) in West Bengal has abandoned the moral principles that once underpinned the philosophy of communism. Establishment of party paramountcy through rapid aggressive expansionism has become the substitute for patient ideological training of its cadres and followers.

The present malaise can be traced to two predispositions in the Left movement. In general, the building of the Communist organisation has been traditionally based on the Leninist concept of vanguardism – the discontented and exploited class supplying the energy and manpower, and the intellectual vanguard providing the leadership for the revolution. In West Bengal, because of the low ideological level of the present generation of its leaders and ministers, its vanguardism took an uncouth form. They simplified Marxism into a militarist drill of sorts, riding roughshod over political opposition and cultural dissent. It gave them the gratifying sense of superiority and fanatical self-confidence, without making them realise that a time would come when the classes that they led could become organised and autonomous enough to resist the dictates of the vanguard (which has happened in Singur and Nandigram). The second proclivity is rooted in the birth of the CPI(M) in 1964.

It was born as a rather belligerent child with a persecution complex – its leaders being put behind bars soon after its formation, its cadres hounded by the state, and forced to operate in secrecy for a long time. As a result, after coming to power in the 1967 and again in the 1969 state assembly elections, the party began to put all its might in spreading its base and devising self-protective mechanisms, which often led to turf-wars with smaller Left parties (e.g., the Communist Party of India, Forward Bloc, and the Revolutionary Socialist Party). Further, the Naxalbari uprising posed not only an ideological challenge, but drew away from it a large number of its younger cadres and followers. Incapable of self-introspection and self-correction – given their inferior intellectual calibre – the party leaders resorted to physical violence to eliminate the Naxalite threat. The most shameful incident took place on August 12, 1971 in Baranagar, near Calcutta, when CPI(M) cadres joined the police in hunting out and slaughtering more than 100 young Naxalite workers and sympathisers.

Although stained by such violent acts of muscle power and overbearing arrogance, that past record of the CPI(M) had paled into insignificance by 1977, in comparison with the more brutal atrocities that the people of West Bengal had to suffer under the Congress during the 1975-76 Emergency. So, when in the 1977 assembly elections, the people voted back the CPI(M) to power, they expected it to be more chastened and develop into a more responsible party. Alas, after the initial period of success and sobriety, the party relapsed into its old mental groove and mode of functioning! The germs of intolerance, insecurity and pugnacity with which it was contaminated at its birth, turned into a full-blown aneurysm.

Need for an Alternative Left

A few words of caution need to be added. All this sense of public revulsion does not add up yet to a statewide agitation against the Left Front government in West Bengal. Most of the incidents that have outraged us are violent examples of local zealotry – both of the CPI(M) and Trinamool variety. There is no general reversal of support against the Left government, and no wind of a change in favour of the Congress, Trinamool – and least of all, the Bharatiya Janata Party – which are trying to fish in the troubled waters. The

electorate is wise enough to recognise that in the absence of any viable alternative that is committed to affirmative action in favour of the poor, the Left Front still remains the best bet. But if things are allowed to drift and the CPI(M) continues to be obdurate in its overlordship and pigheadedness, public outrage may explode and take desperate forms. Right reactionary forces like the Trinamool and BJP are waiting in the wings to take over the leadership of such agitations. The first such ominous signs were evident in Singur and Nandigram.

Strangely enough, instead of striking an independent path and giving an alternative Leftist orientation to the movements in Singur and Nandigram, the ragbag of various Naxalite groups in West Bengal have joined the Trinamool-BJP cabal – in a bid to extend their political base in the state. The disgusting sight of Naxalite leaders cuddling up to Rajnath Singh of the BJP in the same dais during the recent anti-CPI(M) agitations, suggests that they have adopted the same blinkers of political opportunism that blur ideological vision, as had happened in the case of the CPI(M). Both the CPI(M) and the Naxalites have debauched the dream of the Left.

West Bengal is in need of an opposition to challenge the hegemony of a partisan and oppressive CPI(M) governance. But it cannot be left in the hands of the Trinamool-BJP combine – which is more dangerous given its potentialities of creating total anarchy and communal mayhem in West Bengal. The Congress Party in the state is in a shambles. The alternative therefore has to emerge from within a new democratic Left, with constituents that are seriously committed to the ideology of socialism and courageous enough to restore the moral integrity and high principles of the movement. The time has come for all Leftist intellectuals in West Bengal to listen to the still small voice within them, the inner voice of the ethical self, and address the question that was raised many years ago by Langston Hughes, the famous black poet of the US:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
.....
May be it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode? **EW**

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