

# COMMUNISTS AND THE FULFILMENT OF SECULAR PROMISES IN WEST BENGAL

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If there was one fundamental contribution by communists in West Bengal, it was their uncompromising approach towards secularism, arguably one of the essential features of the Indian Constitution. At a time when the secular foundation of the Indian Constitution has been seriously challenged by the rise of majoritarian religious nationalism in the last three decades, it is important to recall the legacy of communists in upholding the secular fabric of the Constitution when they were in the opposition, as well as the manner in which they had implemented secular policies when in government. Communists were the prime opposition for about one-and-a-half decades in West Bengal, right from the first general election in 1952. In the brief interlude from 1967 to 1977, they became part of United Front governments in 1967 and 1969, and stayed in the Opposition from 1971 to 1977. The communists led the Left Front government in West Bengal that ruled for three-and-a-half decades, from 1977 to 2011, to become the world's longest democratically elected government headed by a communist party.

However, one must remember that the communists initially had a sceptical view of India's constitutional democracy in the aftermath of Independence. The Communist Party of India (CPI), along with many other political and social organisations, opposed the celebration of Indian independence on 15 August 1947 in protest of the country's partition. In December 1947, the CPI declared their new slogan, 'Ye Azadi Jhuta Hai' (This independence is a sham). B. T. Ranadive was an architect of the radical political thesis at the second Congress of the CPI, held between 28 February and 6 March 1948 in Calcutta, which was much inspired by the ongoing Chinese

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*Winter 2021–Spring 2022, Volume 48, Numbers 3 & 4*

revolution led by Mao Zedong in China. Ranadive was championing the Left radical political line to identify the Congress, led by Nehru, as a bourgeois party, which became stooges of Anglo–American imperialism and the feudal remnants within the country, and hence inimical to the interests of the freedom of the people. Thus, the communists at that time proposed an armed insurrection in many parts of the country to promote a people’s democratic revolution. During 1948–1949, communists in West Bengal were involved in many rural and urban insurgencies. In Tripura, Telangana and Kerala, the party led armed struggles against local monarchs. However, on 23 October 1951, through a press statement, the Central and the Andhra Committees of the CPI formally announced the withdrawal of the Telangana struggle. They decided ‘to mobilise the entire people for an effective participation in the ensuing general election to defeat the Congress’ (Bandyopadhyay, 2009: 128). By 1951, the communists had adopted a new programme with the help of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. They took part in the 1952 general election after accepting the earlier blunders of Left adventurism. The communists in West Bengal too accepted the central leadership’s line of adopting the parliamentary route to power, using parliamentary democracy as a site of political struggle instead of continuing on the path of insurgency.

The partition of Bengal, based on religious sectarianism, could have created communally charged politics in the state at the time of a massive influx of East Bengal refugees into West Bengal. Nevertheless, the communal mobilisation of refugees was hindered by the positive initiatives taken in organising the East Bengal refugees in and around the rights of livelihood and their right to settlement in the West Bengal province of the new nation state of India. Following the adoption of constitutional democracy in India, the decade of the 1950s in West Bengal was significant in the making of a secular political culture. In July 1953, communists and many Left parties led the anti-tram fare hike movement. It was a movement against a one paisa raise in the fare of the then British tram company. Although the movement lasted for a month, it had rejuvenated other mass movements and mass organisations of communists that were already taking shape from 1952 onwards. On 13 March 1953, 25,000 people were mobilised by the Communist Party in front of the assembly house to demand food and unemployment allowances

(Basu, 1998: 97–99). The following year, in February 1954, there was a teachers' agitation for salary hikes and a rise in dearness allowances. It was the first united movement of school teachers in post-independent India in which the communists played an active role (*ibid.*: 104–11).

Similarly, Bengali communists played an important role in the Goa Liberation struggle of 1955, apart from opposing the move to integrate Bihar and Bengal as one state in 1955–1956. In June–July 1956, they also organised several protest movements and strikes against an inflation crisis. In 1957, communists were party to national strikes by postal services workers on the formation of a second Pay Commission and the denial of several interim reliefs and benefits by the central government. Then, in 1959, the historic food movement took place because of the glorious struggle of the communists in which at least 80 persons were martyred for demanding the availability of rice in the retail market and for curbing high inflation. The food movement, the anti-tram fare hike movement and periodic movements against inflation in the 1950s created an atmosphere of popular politics in and around issues of class and distributive justice. Undoubtedly, the communist preoccupation with class and class politics, along with leading various popular movements in the 1950s, was an essential dimension in creating a secular political culture in the state.

In the late 1950s, and throughout the 1960s, communists were also actively involved in the rehabilitation and resettlement of East Bengal refugees in various colonies in and around Kolkata, and in the border districts of West Bengal. In the 1960s and 1970s, two crucial demands were articulated through charged political rhetoric with a focused rural constituency: the 'abolition of landlordism' and 'land to the tillers'. At the same time, communists were vocal against discrimination by successive central governments towards West Bengal right from the late 1950s when they were in the Opposition. Moreover, when they briefly shared power in the two United Front governments, in 1967 and 1969, and later led the state government from 1977 to 2011, they made some important interventions in critiquing the economic policies of the central government, whether it was the freight equalisation policy, or recommendations by the central finance commission, or the uneven balance of power between the centre and the states. Thus, in the 1980s, federalism, as

a serious national issue, became prominent with the coordination of communists and several regional parties.

Although the Emergency in the country was operational from 25 June 1975 to 21 March 1977, West Bengal was already under autocratic rule from 1972. At that time, communists bore the ire of statist brutalities. Thus, their fight for democracy in the anti-Emergency movement was a continuation of their unimpeachable commitment to parliamentary democracy. It was certainly a momentous break from their earlier position in the late 1940s on parliamentary democracy in India. However, Indian Maoists, who also claim to be communists and sometimes clandestinely operate in West Bengal, still suspect India's parliamentary democracy and are yet to adopt electoral politics as a viable method of political struggle. From the late 1970s, under the Communist Party's regime in West Bengal, the state witnessed long-term political stability after a decade of transition from an unstable and chaotic political system in the late 1960s to the late 1970s (Kohli, 1997: 336–66). After the 1977 election victory, scores of party members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) were urged to retaliate in response to the killing of hundreds of party comrades by the Congress and the Naxalites. However, as a mature communist leader, Jyoti Basu addressed numerous public meetings in every nook and corner of the state, requesting party members not to retaliate, while calling for peace and order in view of the anarchic breakdown in the state. Once elected chief minister of West Bengal in 1977, he initiated the processes of 'restoration of democracy', which, by his own admission in one of his interviews, was a tremendous success of his tenure, even more than land reforms and Panchayati Raj. Once the communists came to power in West Bengal, they immediately delivered on their major poll promise to release political prisoners.

In the anti-Emergency movement in the 1970s, the communists were briefly close to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS). During the anti-Congress movement of the late 1980s, they once more came close to the successor of the Jana Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, unlike many regional players in India, the party made no electoral alliances with the majoritarian religious nationalists like the Jana Sangh or the BJP in the Assembly or Lok Sabha elections. In effect, it had been committed to secular nationalism in India in contrast to the religious nationalism that is dominant in today's electoral democracy.

In the 1980s, the consolidation of power by the communists occurred through the implementation of a series of land reform laws. At the same time, the Left Front, led by communists, was ideologically manipulating the cracks and dissensions within the peasantry by trying to mobilise a united peasant constituency. It had to manage the internal contradictions between the rich and middle peasants, on the one hand, and the smaller peasants, sharecroppers and landless labourers, on the other. The hegemony of the Communist Party was extended to the rural sectors through the agency of school teachers that later created an effective party machinery. This party machinery dominated most of rural society and eventually created a networked grid of dedicated party cadres, described as the ‘party society’ of West Bengal (Bhattacharyya, 2016).

By the 1990s, the communists were fast losing their support in the urban sectors. In this context, it is worth remembering that in the 1950s and 1960s their support base was primarily concentrated in the urban areas. By the 1990s, a new middle class was slowly emerging as a result of the central government’s policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. During that time, the then chief minister Jyoti Basu was often criticised for not attracting investments to boost industry’s prospects in the state. Eventually, when West Bengal’s new industrial policy of 1994 was formulated, Basu continued to assert that industrialisation was to be carried out with a sensible and balanced approach, and with the terms and conditions of the Left Front government as far as possible, not directed by the conditions of foreign banks. In an interview to an English news channel, he pointed out that while welcoming technology and investments from outside, the Left ought to be selective and not blindly follow IMF–World Bank prescriptions, as those institutions were responsible for the financial crisis in South East Asia and Latin America. He further clarified that economic reforms could not afford to ignore 70 per cent of the poor in the country. In this regard, India ought to formulate its unique economic agenda for self-reliance. In other words, according to Basu’s vision, the industrialisation policy was accountable to the ‘people’—workers and peasants, the Left’s basic classes—and not to the whimsical wishes of corporate capital. Indeed, under his leadership, the Left Front tried to uplift the basic material living conditions of the working classes and peasantry. At the grassroots

level, Basu's Left regime implemented land reforms and effective institutionalisation of decentralised democracy via Panchayati Raj, which ensured the rural empowerment of traditionally oppressed and exploited sections of the state's population. His government resolved the quotidian problem of electricity shortage in the state. Under his leadership, West Bengal became a strong, self-reliant agrarian state and made some progress towards industrialisation. On the other hand, his government tried to ensure a minimum wage for labour, taking some concrete initiatives to address the problems of the informal sector, and other democratic rights such as the right to strike. Moreover, his uncompromising approach in fighting communalism, while championing the cause of secularism, was unquestionable.

The politics of distributive justice in West Bengal, as practised by the communists, were primarily expressed on three counts: (i) implementation of land reforms through which subaltern castes and classes obtained ownership of land and gained access to agricultural occupations; (ii) implementation of the Panchayati Raj system, where political power was decentralised and new caste groups and erstwhile lower castes and minorities had their share of power at the local level, and; (iii) calls for federalism by demanding more political and financial powers to the state, while campaigning to implement the recommendations of the Sarkaria Commission.

By the turn of the 21st century, the new chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya was eager to procure significant investments from big corporate capital. The drive towards corporate industrialisation was a concerted effort. However, the conflict of class interests between the Left Front's support base of peasants, and absentee landowners, created a fiasco. By 2006–2007, a visible discrepancy was noticed in the desired development model between the Left's urban middle-class constituencies, and rural subaltern farmers and landless labourers dependent on agriculture. During the later years of the Left Front government, particularly from the 1990s onwards, the communists faced a unique problem of policy implementation at the local level. This was because of a parallel system of institutional leadership directly elected by the people, and party functionaries having control over the elected representatives. The checks and balances on the state government, municipalities and panchayats by the party were necessary for curtailing governmental

corruption. However, it occasionally created a problem of timely delivery and implementation of policy promises.

During the Left Front rule in West Bengal, major communal riots were avoided owing to the strict vigilance of the government and the firm determination of party activists to resist any communal provocation. In the late 1970s, several riots were organised in north India. There was tension in West Bengal, too, particularly on the issue of Vinoba Bhave's demand to ban beef eating. There were riots in many parts of northern and western India after Indira Gandhi's death, and in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition. In fact, after the 2002 Gujarat genocide, Qutubuddin Ansari, the poster-boy victim of the Gujarat carnage, decided to shift to Kolkata with the financial help of the Left Front government. Needless to say, his decision to move to West Bengal was to live in a state that is considered safe for religious minorities. Nevertheless, the secular regime of the communists in West Bengal was tarnished by three events. First, the mishandling of the Rizwanur Rahman case by the Kolkata police in 2007. Second, the socio-economic backwardness of Muslims in West Bengal, as revealed by the Sachar Report in 2006. Third, the alienation of Muslim peasants from the Communist Party in the wake of land acquisition, and their dispossession during the making of the New Town–Rajarhat satellite township, and later during the Nandigram protests in 2007.

To rectify the wrongs of socio-economic development of Muslim minorities, the Left Front took some belated corrective measures. Till 2009, the quota for reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs in the state was merely 7 per cent. In 2010, West Bengal reserved an additional 10 per cent of all state government jobs for OBCs hailing from the most backward communities among both Hindus and Muslims, as per the recommendation of the Ranganath Misra Commission. After the recommendations of the Misra Commission were made public in 2007, a list of 56 'More Backward Communities', 49 of them Muslim, was included in the OBC–A list in West Bengal. As a result, at that time, of the 2.02 crore Muslims in West Bengal, 1.72 crore, or 85 per cent of the total Muslim population in the state, was notified as OBCs. West Bengal was the first state to implement the Misra Commission recommendations (Islam, 2019: 169).

An essential aspect of the backwardness of the Muslim minority has been landlessness. After 1947, landlessness amongst

Muslims increased in most parts of India. However, West Bengal was an exception under communist rule. The success of land reforms under Left-led governments significantly benefitted Muslims. By National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 2004–2005 estimates, of rural households in West Bengal, Muslim households, constituting 30.9 per cent, had access to 25.6 per cent of total cultivated land. It was second only to Jammu & Kashmir, which had a much higher percentage of Muslims and had access to 30.3 per cent of cultivable land in the state. According to the Budget speech made in 2011 by Asim Kumar Dasgupta, the last finance minister of the Left Front government, 18 per cent of the total number of land *pattas*<sup>1</sup> distributed in West Bengal between 1977 and 2010 went to Muslim households.

By the early 1990s, an academic study argued that a minimal type of reformism was being practised in West Bengal, instead of radical change in people's lives. It was neither a socialist nor a capitalist state, and lagged behind many business-oriented states in India (Mallick, 1993). At the same time, it must be noted that there were several limitations to the functioning of a mere provincial government led by communists when successive central governments were run by those parties which were diametrically opposite to communist ideology. Nonetheless, there were specific positive and visible changes in the lives of ordinary people as a result of the Left Front government's policies in the spheres of rural development, education, women's issues, labour relations and electricity that made such a long regime of communists possible (Basu, 1997). The success of secular politics championed by communists also had some drawbacks pertaining to the state's development indicators. West Bengal had been a moderately performing state in various sectors of education and health under the communists. According to the 2011 Census, also the last year of the Left Front government, the state was below the national average regarding access to rural electricity, tapped drinking water, television and banking services.

The communist preoccupation with class politics had indeed made them vocal supporters of secular politics. However, it has somehow detached them from the sensibilities of caste and community questions, which is evident from the relative socio-economic backwardness of Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims when compared to other social groups in West Bengal in a regime



heavily dominated by three upper castes—Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas—both at the levels of ministries and party leadership. In other words, the robust version of secular politics that the communists practised somehow made them ignorant about social justice politics. In many parts of India, the politics of social justice was complementary to a secular approach to politics. However, in West Bengal, under communist rule, the politics of social justice was largely left unaddressed. At the same time, the security and identity of Muslims were maintained, while caste and communal wars were unheard of, unlike many other states in the rest of India. But the issues of equity—in matters of education and employment, and the political representation of Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis—were somehow neglected during communist rule, which should not have been the case in an exceptionally successful model of secular governance.

After 2011, the communists were in the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly till the last assembly election of 2021. One can philosophically argue that in a parliamentary democracy, the Left should always be in the Opposition. The structure of Parliament is such that the Opposition sits on the left of the Speaker. The government sits on the Speaker's right. In West Bengal, communists were trained in trade union politics in a social system of fundamental contradiction between labour and capital. Communists think that the Indian state serves the interests of big capital. But their pedagogy has been largely foreign, taking lessons from Russian and Chinese communists. Both the CPI and the various factions of CPI (ML) became smaller parties as a result of a path dependence to follow either the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or the Chinese Communist Party. In contrast, the CPI(M) became the largest communist party because it tried to chart an independent path of Indian revolution. But India, which is described as *Bharat* in the first article of the Constitution, is a land of various linguistic groups. The communists of West Bengal should be clear about the practical issues of contemporary West Bengal and that of the people of the great land of *Banga* to stay relevant. The historic land of *Banga* is referred to in the national anthem of India. Today, there are political elements, particularly within the Sangh Parivar, who pose a greater threat to the constitutional idea of secular India and the coexistence of various religious and linguistic groups with a broad vision of *Bharat*. Currently, the communists have no representative in the West Bengal legislative

assembly, partly because of their wrong tactical line of equating the BJP and the Trinamool in the state. The communists in West Bengal must be clear about the primary political opponent in the state. They have largely been opposing the regional party, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) after 2011. But the constitutional promise is not under huge threat from AITC, but from the ruling establishment in Delhi.



#### NOTE

1. Also referred to as 'Record of Rights', land *patta* is a legal document that includes the details of the legal owner of the land property/plot, or the person in whose name the property is registered at the registrar's office.

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