

# Left Politics in India: Changing Contours

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## Abstract

At the outset, the paper is aimed at understanding the prevailing perceptions of Indian social and economic setting in which the Leftist politics is situated. As part of giving an outline of what the Leftist politics was all about and how it changed the socio-political climate in its strongholds and elsewhere in the country, an attempt is made to delineate the positions and programmes that the Leftist parties had undertaken over the years. Focused on the role of the dominant Leftist party like the CPM, the paper is aimed at analyzing its unchanged positions on certain critical issues that became significant in its present predicament. Although the CPM, as part of the Leftist politics had played a very dynamic role for decades, its electoral politics has been stagnating in the recent decades in its bastions like the Bengal, Telangana, Kerala and others. This paper tries to identify certain problems in its theoretical and practical perspectives so as to seek its intervention, if the leftist politics is to regain its electoral strength, if not past glory, to some extent.)

**Keywords:** Communist, Agitation, Struggle, Ideological.

## Introduction

The Leftist movement has had a glorious record of democratic struggles in India. Aimed at transforming the socio-economic plight of vast mass of its people, the communist movement, popularly known as the Leftist movement, had influenced the Indian state and its political system. The Leftists having organized protracted campaigns and historic agitations in the countryside, particularly in Telangana, Tebhaga and Punnapra-Vayalar among other areas, emerged as the overriding political force in several regions. The socio-economic policies and programmes of ruling and opposition parties were greatly affected due to their activities, more so in the pre-split period<sup>1</sup>. For, the Left was in a commanding position to situate the government agenda and thereby compelled the non-left parties to implement it in the form of several reforms invariably!

In consequence, the Leftist parties secured the political mandate of the people, whereby the Left front became the ruling regime in Kerala for the first time<sup>2</sup> in the country. Similarly, the Leftists got popular mandate in Telangana (Hyderabad State), Andhra (Madras State), Travancore (Kerala) and Tebhaga (West Bengal) regions thereafter. The Leftist leadership was acting in response to the economic demands and social aspirations of the people at the grassroots level. For, their leaders and cadres were closely engaged in local level agitations and social activities. Besides economic problems, socio-cultural, community and personal issues were taken up on priority basis. Although Leftist political activities were marked by militant and violent incidents, the Left was largely recognized as a democratic movement.

Incidentally, transformation of the Indian society was also assumed by the Leftists long before India became 'independent'. However, the Left was disinclined to analyze the prevailing objective conditions in Indian society like the religious diversity, casteistsocial practices, regional disparity, linguistic plurality and ethnic identities as these existed concretely. Obsessed with subjective interpretation of an alien ideology<sup>3</sup> and on the guidance from external agencies<sup>4</sup>, the left movement suffered several setbacks. Even the splits and re-splits in the communist movement were influenced by the International communist schism indeed<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the left parties were engrossed in ideological and political polemics and strategic errors, which seem to be continued unabated despite their suffering setbacks in elections or otherwise.

In fact, the ruling regimes were setting the socio-economic agenda that was to be responded to and merely implemented by the left parties, rather than the other way round! Obviously, the Left lost its pre-eminent position in the political horizon of the country. In consequence, the

left influence on the people's livelihood and social changes was significantly restricted over a period of time. Confined to a few peripheral states and regions, the leftist parties got disoriented from their long term objective of left and democratic revolution in the country.

Although political transformation was notably discernible, its economic and social dimensions were fractional. Less said the better about cultural transformation that was hindered with variety of factors. Some of these basic factors included were the nature of Indian society, religious base, state character, class analysis, regime types and party systems among others. Obviously, the process of such social transformation is still incomplete today. While Indian society is manifest with the patriarchy, Hindu social hierarchy, caste system, regional variation, ethnic diversity, linguistic plurality, its state/governance is perpetually aimed at addressing economic deprivation and mass poverty.

Resorted to automated application of alien ideologies and strategies, the left parties refused to study the works and writings of native philosophers and social revolutionaries<sup>6</sup>. Nor did these parties appreciate the contribution of Netaji, Lohia, or for that matter even the 'Gandhis' and the 'Nehrus' at all. Rather all those who were so revered in the country were dubbed as 'foreign agents' at times. In contrast, the philosophy and principles of Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and other alien social scientists, were applied to the abstract Indian conditions in both theory and practice as part of democratic transformation. Not only that the Left parties were willing to modify their misinterpretations and misdeeds but tried to impose their misconceived notions on the society at large. Particularly, the major issues of Indian society that caused polarization among people were caste and community on which the communists maintained stony silence till recently.

#### **Review of Literature**

Pradip Bose, (1995): "Communism and Communist system: Some reflections" analyzes the left programmes in India and their consequent impact in Indian Politics.

Atul Kohli, (1997): "From breakdown to order: West Bengal" in Partha Chatterji (ed.) state and politics in India, discusses the CPM Policies in West Bengal, specially in agricultural reforms and its consequent impacts.

Sudipto Kaviraj, (1979): "The split in the Communist Movement in India, (Ph.D. Thesis) explores the reasons for the left break resulting in CPI and CPM.

#### **Objective of the Study**

The paper analyses the Leftist politics in the Indian setting, and identifies certain problems in its theoretical and practical prospective. Leftist overhang with the ideological baggage has considerably hindered left parties political growth and maturity. The paper explores the contours of leftist politics and its implication in India. The paper also analyses the relation of CPM with other main stream parties.

#### **Political Polemics**

Incidentally, the Left parties were ahead of others in launching popular struggles wherever they were strongly entrenched. Their positive contribution in terms of leadership integrity, character and sacrifices were unparallel in the political history of India. But, their activity was largely focused on the economic demands of the people in general and working class in particular. The Leftist strategies since stemmed from their erroneous ideological interpretation of Indian reality (ruling-class analysis), their alliance policies were inconsistent. At a time when political parties were to represent the interests of different segments of the society (Hindu social hierarchy), the Leftist ones got distracted. Thus, their ideological polemics in identifying the political enemy were widely exposed. As part of their orthodox 'class analysis', the approach of 'unity and struggle' with the congress and other 'bourgeois parties' was somehow misconceived. Besides, their solidarity with International regimes on ideological basis diluted the Leftist struggles on certain economic issues as well.

Moreover, the Left was also expected to focus on the non-economic issues like caste and community and thereby to act accordingly. Even in the case of language, region tribe and ethnic issues too, the Left perception was sighted by the bigoted view of ground realities at home. Due to its faulty understanding of these concerns of the people, the left remained a mute spectator to such happenings. Thus, leftist parties failed to respond to the agitations and movements that were structured from these social categories. Leave alone its interference in such activities; the very language of Leftist politics was so vague and abstract that it was incomprehensible to laymen. For instance, as its 'class analysis' was confused with 'political alliance' with non-left parties, its 'proletarian agenda' was favored to congress regimes.

In other words, the Leftist parties were lost in thought due to International communist hegemony that was already diverged along soviet and Chinese lines. Interestingly, some of their political stands/slogans that were aimed at elevating their counterparts in countries that became hostile to India entrapped them in political crisis. In fact, during the period of Sino-Indian war in 1962, main communist party under formation (CPI-M) faced the ire of Indian nationalists. Engrossed with 'International obligation', the Left was seen as collaborating with 'Indian ruling regimes' on several occasions<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the Left was left out from the mainstream political space at regular intervals<sup>8</sup>. Obviously, the political vacuum that was created by the Left was packed with non-left parties at all levels. Rise of such political formations like Akalidal/National Conference, DMK/ADMK, Shiva Sena/TDP, BSP/SP, JMM/TRS in different parts of the country is a case in point.

Apparently, the Leftist parties continued to commit the same mistakes as usual, and on end. Of course, they were openhanded in admitting them as part of doing 'postmortem', as historical mistakes during the course of their party congresses. These

parties were good at indulging in ideological polemics, but hardly rectified their mistakes. Certainly, it was a mismatch that distracted the shifting of party systems in the post-independent India. More so was the case with Leftist party systems in the country. Thus, the Left got caught up with analyzing the objective nature of society, state and ruling regimes in unusual ways.

Expectedly, its political implications are detrimental whereby the Left itself got split. Added to this ideological dimension, prejudiced reading by the leaderships of tangible situation had precipitated the political and ideological crisis. As a result, the Left movement and politics was divided vertically along ideological lines. Subjected to recurrent splits and re-splits, the Leftist politics was retreating whereas the non-Left ones surged ahead. Besides, the community-caste-tribe oriented political formations in the mainstream states, the language-region-leadership based groups and parties in the peripheral areas in India had almost overtaken the Leftist parties.

#### **Parliamentary Primacy**

Gradually, both the Leftist parties were caught into the parliamentary politics that caused dissection in the communist movement on different occasions. Like other political parties the Left ones had also considered the parliamentary path as a Constitutional opportunity. And, it became their main agenda, if not priority area. The Leftist parties defended the parliamentary politics only to be involved into it fully. For, it was conceived as the best mode of democratic transformation in India, notwithstanding their subjective choices. In any case, the existing electoral system offered the Left many an option to consolidate a few political gains (short term ones), indeed! Moreover, the Leftist parties tried to utilize the parliamentary institutions as long as their programmatic and political works could be advanced. But, they hardly raised the ideological issues in elections. Instead, socio-economic demands that contented the electorate were being included in their election manifestoes, invariably<sup>9</sup>.

Besides, the Leftist parties argued that their numerical show in elections at different levels provided them a measure tool of their organizational growth. Very often, the parties referred to electoral statistics so as to explain how popular these were in a state or two. Of course, their electoral arithmetic was a key factor in clearing up political power. Not only have the Leftist parties sought political power to provide some relief to the masses, but also to enhance their physical strength. In other words, these parties gained strength in those states where their electoral performance was exceptional. And, their organizational strength was also multiplied whenever they were in governments on their own or otherwise. Still, there are some critics who attribute their numerical strength due to their compromise on militant struggles. The Leftist parties were accused of adopting reformist policies through regime control and thus emerged robust in 1980s<sup>10</sup>. While it reflects their quantitative dimension, the parties failed to preserve the qualitative or ideological sanctity in their membership.

Although the leftist parties claimed to have organized militant struggles in the villages and towns, their main objective had been to secure political mandate through periodic elections at all levels. More than their claims of extra-parliamentary activism, the Leftist parties were betrothed to electoral politics. It cannot be an overstatement if one says that these parties were almost infatuated with electoral-oriented agitations. Intended to derive utmost political benefits these parties got engaged in organizing agitations more on the eve of elections than other times! Still, the parties failed to realize the expected electoral objectives.

In an effort to establish itself as a viable alternative to the ruling Congress system, or its regimes at different levels, the Left expected the challenge of parliamentary politics in a couple of states in the country. Not only did the Left have accompanied the Congress and its different by-products viz., parties, groups, movements and regimes, but also affianced the non-Congress parties that were positioned in both government and outside. While the mainstream parties in the 'centre' and 'right' situations, as well as those at the 'regional' level initiated the political agenda for Leftist parties, the latter in turn got mixed up with the ideological polemics. In fact, ideological issues were compromised for the purpose of gaining a few seats in elections through incompatible alliance policies.

Despite a few splits in the communist movement, the Left parties maintained their control in electoral politics in half a dozen states in the country. Incidentally, the combined Left emerged as the main opposition political formation in the parliament in 1980<sup>10</sup>. In consequence, the Left got unsettled from its political objectives of long term nature. For instance, their supposed democratic revolution<sup>11</sup> was abstracted and disrupted once for all. Once considered to be its bastion areas, Hyderabad, Madras, Punjab, Bihar, Kerala and West Bengal were seized by non-left parties gradually. Not only that these non-left entities induced positive response but also swapped the left ones. Besides, these parties got hold of political command to have influence over state politics.

Gradually, this non-left formation was elevated to the centre-stage i.e., the Parliament of India by early 1980s. Incidentally, the Andhra Pradesh-based regional party like Telugu Desham Party (TDP) replaced the CPI-M in the Lok Sabha as the main opposition party in 1984<sup>12</sup> itself! In other words, the main Communist parties had always tied their lot to parliamentary path, and thereby campaigned for land reforms and trade union rights whereby opposing moves toward privatization. Despite some limitations, the Left had utilized the Parliamentary institutions effectively to highlight the economic problems of the people and thereby tried to influence the regimes at different levels.

In the first UPA regime, both the Communist parties and their allies, as part of the Leftist bloc that extended outside support, were a significant component of the ruling alliance. These parties were

critiqued for being economically benefitted out of such close relationship. Incidentally, they became detested for enjoying political power in disproportion to their electoral strength and of course, without any accountability. Their tactical proximity to the UPA regime was misconstrued in Leftist circles and outside. Even those protagonists who welcomed the leftist relationship with the UPA initially had become apprehensive of negative implications about it thereafter. More than the domestic issues and concerns, far-off ones were upmost in the Leftist perspective. In any case, the Leftist leadership was guarded with regard to its political differences with the UPA regime.

Meanwhile, Leftist opposition to an Indo-U.S. nuclear deal nearly brought down the UPA government last time when the Communist parties, which viewed the American role through a Cold War matrix. For, it constantly clamored against strengthening any sort of ties between New Delhi and Washington. At once, the Leftist parties pulled out of the ruling UPA coalition and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh scarcely survived a no-confidence motion. Then, they had been relegated to the outer edge of parliamentary dominion. Meanwhile Dr. Singh's second UPA regime tried to push through significant liberalizing measures, including disinvestment from public sectors such as banking, health and education, and finally the foreign direct investment policies. At a time, when the process of globalization had been affecting the vast mass of people quite adversely, particularly the marginalized communities, the role of Leftist became very inconsequential.

Incidentally, Indian Communists had always been key electoral players in states like West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura where the Leftist fronts had ruled for several years. But its trounce, in the last general elections in 2009 and 2014, has plunged the Leftist parties into serious political crisis. Since their electoral strength had been retarded not only in parliament, but also in their strongholds, the Left image suffered setback on the political plane. More particularly, ever since the CPM and its partners had been defeated in the last Bengal Assembly elections in 2011, their credibility was at stake. For, the CPM apparently lost political contact with common people so also with their aspirations. Interestingly, it failed in managing not only the politics, but also the society in Bengal!

Viewed in this perspective, there is a call for of making political introspection to its leadership. For, major fallout of long reign of the Leftist parties in Bengal was an enormous surge in the reach and domination of their trade unions across the countryside. For decades, these unions seem to have had a monopoly on the nationalized banks, state electricity boards, centre or state-owned industries and non-industrial corporations, with gravely tragic results. The most abysmal part of CPM violence is to make every institution education, police and judiciary political. Obviously, all these factors had impacted on the process of its reverse journey in elections and

otherwise, which eventually landed the Left in parliamentary pitfalls.

#### **Governance Predicament**

Whether or not one likes it, Communism is not dead in India. It only changed its shape to go well with the changing society. Communism may not fail in India where over large percentage of people is below poverty line, as per ground reality! Although the communist ideology is idealistic it has been proved feasible in India and elsewhere. As many critics pointed out that the major problem with communists was that they were living in the past. They always protested India's economic reforms from the global perspective. For instance, the way they protested Indo-US nuclear deal was because of their anti-Americanism rather than on domestic and environmental concerns. Thus, they had to face the wrath of the majority people even in their strongholds. Its electoral implications vindicated the point.

Although the Leftist defeat in recent elections is a transitory phase, the Leftist had gained about 30 percent votes in West Bengal. Still, their numerical strength was insufficient to retain the state government. Since the party was voted out of power in the state, the CPM had countenanced serious challenges to its authenticity within the left front and outside. Thus, it necessitates these parties to probe into serious lapses that occurred during the course of elections or before. More than their electoral miscalculations, the party-led front was landed in governance problems. Despite some limitations or failures in the past, the Leftist regime was allowed to rule as there was no workable alternative emerging to it in the state. Although Mamatha Banerjee-led Trinamul Congress was successful in the state, it was more on account of Leftist fiasco, rather than on any positive vote. Some of the omissions and commissions that the Left front regime committed for over three decades had been attributed for its electoral debacle.

More recently, the left regime had been criticized from different position in the state. Even some of its ruling allies were on record challenging the CPM's approach in the realm of governance. Not only that the party became a 'doctrinaire ruling party in West Bengal'<sup>13</sup>, but it also demonstrated its orthodox behavior within and outside the Left front. Any party in opposition can get along with any sort of controversial policies, but as a ruling party it cannot sail smoothly. Since the public policies not only affect its partners within the coalition, but outside state and society, the leadership cannot be inflexible in its approach. The party's dogmatic stand on some contentious policies of land acquisition, industry and employment earned it some brickbats.

In response, the CPM state Chief BimanBasu<sup>14</sup>, commented that the results were "totally unexpected". At a time when whole country was familiar with the developments in Bengal, the state party chief could not be so ignorant of its political repercussion in the elections. Besides, opinion polls, exit polls and reportage had predicted the leftist rout. Still, the communists and their allies had not

anticipated it. Thus they had to explain what went wrong leading to such a disaster for a party which had ruled the state for 34 years without a break, and prided itself on reading the pulse of the people like no other party. Further, Basu observed that "The opposition slogan for ushering in parivartan (change) was endorsed by the people. We didn't understand that. We have grassroots connection with people, but people didn't open their mouths, and we couldn't assess their stirrings for a change". What an ironical revelation of a leader who was at the helm of its affairs for over decades in Kolkatta!

In any case, many Leftist critics assume that communists did achieve nothing positive when they were leading governments either in Kerala or Bengal. Perhaps, they overlook what Bengal had gained better position in some of the areas over the years. These included: poverty eradication, hunger problem, land reforms, drinking water, abolition of bonded labor, primary education, democratization of local governments, communal harmony and law and order. According to some authentic sources<sup>15</sup> the leftist regimes performed better as compared to many developed states in the country. Even in the case of personal integrity of its leadership and for maintaining a less-corrupt government, the leftist regimes were second to none. Relatively, the leftists' leaders are ahead of others in leading normal public life.

Thus, these critics have to acknowledge that the communists did something right for which common people in Bengal elected them for over seven consecutive terms. It is neither an accident nor under attainment for the Left. Particularly, the communists did accomplish some good work in Kerala. Its human development indices on primary education, gender sensitivity, health care and elimination of poverty are among the best in India. It also has the highest life expectancy. In comparison with many states in the country, the Leftist regimes had contributed splendidly to the democratic transformation of its people. Significantly, the party carried out far-reaching land reforms, ushered in local democracy through village councils and gave the working class some dignity. Still, they seem to be waging a losing battle in the parliamentary politics as is evident from the recent electoral debacle<sup>16</sup> in Bengal, more than what the left suffered elsewhere in the country!

Incidentally, somewhere down the line in a fast-changing society the communists, as some critics suppose, seemed to have lost their way forward. Following the first wave of rural reforms that had exhausted its potential, there is a need of brand new ideas as governments cut back on public spending, and private capital was publicized as the main driver of economic growth. Besides, the land reforms had run its course in Bengal, and farm produce prices were falling. In view of rising sway of market forces in the national economy and keen competition among several states to attract private capital, the communist regimes found it tricky to match its anti-globalization idiom with the practice of peculiar federalism.

Truly, the Leftist parties were under the Parliamentary notion that they could ensure democratic transformation of Indian society in the given federal set up. As long their influence was restricted to a state or two, their political appeal could not be reached out to the vast mass of Indian electorate. That may largely be depended upon their ability to change themselves prior to moving on transforming Indian society. The parties need to adjust their ideological and strategic understandings keeping in view of changing social and geographical situations<sup>17</sup>. While there is an urgent need to recognize the role of religion, language, region, caste and community in the society, polity and culture, their economic struggles cannot be detached from the prevalent social transformation agenda.

Lastly, the Leftist parties have to study retrospectively to find out how much damage that the split(s) had caused in the communist movement. Consequently, Leftist parties and leadership need to change their tactical alliances as per popular aspirations. Their political slogans and public policies have to be insightful, and set to the emerging needs beyond parliamentary path. The very language of parliamentary politics needs to be rejuvenated. Their agitational activity cannot be pigeonholed and along the lines that non-parliamentary parties and groups usually undertake. Their political priority should be oriented more towards domestic concerns rather than the external ones. It is time they become 'glasnostic and perestroikite', so that the Leftist understand the Indian societal changes in right perspective, as much the Leftist integrity and intentions are also understood better by the poor and downtrodden castes in the country.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude it, the Left movement and the parties that were so decisive in the initial stage of Independent India had been relegated to peripheral role thereafter. Failed to acknowledge the contribution of Indian social revolutionaries (Phule and Ambedkar), the Left had alienated itself from the vast mass of people in the mainstream areas. Inaugurated as a popular democratic force in the countryside in several states, the Left became marginalized as it was divided along political lines. Interestingly, individual factors were also attributed for the misinterpretation of social reality (linguistic stand on Telangana state formation) whereby the Left was left out of the political dynamics of the country.

Since the Left got disoriented from the revolutionary path of struggles, it had to enter into alliances of all sorts minus ideological understanding at the state and center levels, only to endure in the electoral matrix. While its parliamentary politics paid certain dividends in some states on couple of occasions electorally, if not organizationally, the Left could hardly live on in large many states. In consequence, the Left had failed in realizing its long-term objective of democratic transformation of Indian society for long. Finally, it is time for the Left politics to become conscious of its electoral fatalities due to parliamentary pitfalls even in its traditional

strongholds. Unless it does some introspection and changes itself, it is impractical to carry out the adventure of transforming Indian polity, if not its society in the near future.

#### References

1. *Communist split occurred in 1964 for the first time, whereby the communist movement was split into different streams.*
2. *EMSNamboodiripad-led Left front formed the Kerala government in 1957.*
3. *For instance, Marxism and Leninism as well as Stalinism and Maoism thereafter.*
4. *International Communist Parties and Leaders, in the name of proletarian solidarity.*
5. *Sudipto Kaviraj, The Split in the Communist Movement in India, (PhD thesis, JNU, New Delhi, 1979) p.32.*
6. *For instance, JyotiraoPhule, SahujiMaharaj, Periyar, Narayana Guru, Dr.Ambedkar among others*
7. *While the CPI followed the instructions of the Soviet Union only to collaborate with the Congress party regime till emergency, the CPIM advocated the path of Chinese Revolution to be implemented in India for decades on end.*
8. *The CPM faced the wrath of not only common people, but also its cadre in Telangana, for its faulty stand on opposing the new state formation. Its unpopular stand has reminded the people its predicament it suffered in the wake of India-China war in 1962, indeed.*
9. *Vidyasagar K., Communist Politics in India: Struggle for Survival (New Delhi: Academic Excellence, 2005) p.75*
10. *KohliAtul, From Breakdown to Order: West Bengal, in ParthaChatterjee (ed) State and Politics in India (Delhi: OUPress, 1997).pp.356-57.*
11. *The CPM became the single largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha in 1980.*
12. *The CPI, CPM and CPI ML advocated three different interpretations of democratic revolution like National, Peoples and New democratic revolutions respectively.*
13. *In the backdrop of assassination of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress party got the absolute majority in Lok Sabha in 1984. Parties like the CPI-M were defeated in its strongholds like West Bengal and Kerala by the Congress party in about 10 and 5 sitting seats.*
14. *Pradip Bose, Communism and Communist systems: Some Reflections (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Pub, 1995) p.427.*
15. *His comments were quoted by an Indian reporter to the BBC, following the election results.*
16. *As per the UNDP, BBC and many other reports, the Left front regime had achieved progress in different areas, of course in comparison with other states in India.*
17. *Left parties suffered the most in their stronghold like West Bengal in the 2014 General Elections. More humiliating thing was about an 'untouchable party' like the BJP emerging victorious in getting votes as well as seats in recent times in the state.*
18. *As a party of the poor and downtrodden, the leftist parties have to consider caste as the most pertinent issue in devising their alliance policy, since both caste and class coincide in the Indian context. Obviously, the BSP, the party of the same social base draws attention, in such alliance exercise. Perhaps, alliance between the left and BSP would pave the way for polarization of both social and political forces in the country, that faces the increasing threat of globalization in recent times.*