1

INCEPTION: GOVERNMENT AS PRACTICE

Parliamentary left parties in India never had it so bad before. In the national election of 2014, they won barely 12 seats, down from 60 odd seats they got 10 years ago, when their support proved crucial to form the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in New Delhi. By contrast, the left is now voted out of relevance in national politics. It is virtually wiped out in its bastion – West Bengal – where the tally came down sharply from 35 to merely 2 seats. Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, some 20 years or so after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mainstream left slid from its historic high to an all-time low in the country's electoral battlefield. This dramatic debacle also coincides with an unprecedented rise of rightwing forces clustering around a party of religious and market fundamentalism. The question is: can India's democratic left ever hope to retrieve, and how?

An attempt to answer this cannot but move through West Bengal – an eastern Indian state with a population of 90 million – where an alliance of communist and socialist parties, the Left Front, ran a government for 34 years, from 1977 to 2011. It had been an exceptional feat for a government to win elections without a break for so long in the slippery domain that is Indian politics. Few such cases of continuity perhaps exist in the democratic world. Barring the troubling last half decade, the alliance maintained its superiority in every local, regional or national election by garnering almost half of popular votes and an overwhelming number of

constituencies. Just when the regime seemed 'invincible' after a resounding triumph in 2006 election, its popular support started to wane. In 2011, the Left Front government met with its first definitive defeat. The left's rare continuity and dramatic collapse – this book argues – can be traced to the dynamics of its administrative and strategic priorities as a governmental force in West Bengal. In this chapter we travel through some major turns in its long journey over some seven decades and ask how the democratic left can think afresh beyond its restricted social, ideological and regional appeal, and hope to contribute meaningfully to the evolving ideational and public policy debates in a rapidly transforming India.

The making

The Left Front was dominated by communists who were not 'natural born citizens' of liberal democracy. Their approach to democratic government took shape since the 1940s when they were nowhere near holding administrative power in any state. On the eve of independence, in June 1947, the Communist Party of India (CPI) made a conciliatory note by deciding to 'fully cooperate' with the Congress in the 'proud task of building the Indian Republic on democratic foundations'. The party was in favour of allowing some breathing space to the new government so that it got a chance to deliver 'its promises through legal channels'. Such affability, however, was not uniformly spread within the ranks of the left. Those engaged in a bitter fight with the Nizam's dynastic rule and illegal feudal exactions in Telangana since 1946 treated the new government with utter contempt, as a purveyor of 'colonial' policies under the influence of the big bourgeoisie. They proposed a Maoist agrarian revolution to establish people's democracy. Another group, centering on Bombay, made a passionate plea in December 1947 for an armed democratic and socialist revolution in a Russian-type seizure of power.

For many left activists, a 'proletarian revolution' was imminent in the first three years of independence. The repression by the Indian state kept pace with these aspirations, causing a sharp drop in the membership

of the party, which had little resilience to withstand such pressure. In several states, including West Bengal, Bombay and Madras, the party was declared illegal. The Telangana peasant struggle was brutally put down without the communists realizing even part of their demands. In 1950, the proletarian revolutionary line was rejected by none less than the Communist Information Forum (Cominform), which insisted on the Chinese path for the people in many colonial and dependent countries. The revolutionaries in the CPI were in a quandary.

Between early and mid-1950s, a number of events prompted the communists to revise their characterization of the Nehru regime. The Soviet leaders Khrushchev and Bulganin visited India, the US offered military support to India's rival Pakistan and Nehru signed *Panchsheel* with Chau-En-Lai. By 1956 CPI displayed some eagerness to ally with the 'progressive elements' in the Congress, while rejecting an extreme proposal for forging a united front. The twentieth congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) proposed 'peaceful path to socialism', facilitating a CPI resolution in its fifth congress (Amritsar, 1958) that favoured containment of class struggle within the limits of the Indian Constitution. This, once again, created deep internal schism that was apparent in the sixth congress (Vijaywada, 1961) of the CPI before splitting the party on the eve of its seventh congress in 1964 (for a detailed analysis see Kaviraj, 1979).

At least four disagreements made the backdrop for the CPI split. First, there were differences on whether to accept the Soviet proposal for a 'peaceful transition to socialism'. Second, the party was divided on whom to support in the Sino-Soviet dispute or whether to maintain neutrality. Third, the Indo-China border conflict in 1962 polarized the party down the middle. In addition, no unanimity was reached on how to characterize the Indian bourgeoisie or the Congress under Nehru. The CPI strived to reconcile two main factions, a 'conservative' right and a 'radical' left.

The right followed the Soviet line on transition, merged with the nationalist position on war, backed the 'progressive' bourgeois leadership of the Congress and embraced parliamentary over extra-parliamentary

activism rather uncritically. The left, by contrast, decided to maintain its autonomy with respect to Sino-Soviet rivalry, insisted that the industrial proletariat and the peasantry, not the national bourgeoisie, were the leading 'revolutionary' forces and kept open the option of extra-parliamentary struggles while participating in institutional democracy.[1] The right had a larger, if thinner, spread across the country, the left, which also absorbed the centrists, had strong organizations in three major states – Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. The right stayed in the CPI, while the left broke out and formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. Eventually the CPI(M) became the fulcrum of two coalition governments in West Bengal between 1967 and 1969, and thereafter of the Left Front government since 1977.

In the state elections in 1967, the Congress lost its uninterrupted rule over several states, including West Bengal. The preceding years were particularly turbulent with stirring effects on West Bengal. The Third Five Year Plan had faltered, industry suffered from depression and many states – West Bengal included – faced an acute food shortage.[2] The situation worsened in 1966, as the Third Plan was concluding, a severe draught wiped out the winter crop. With rupee devalued, import cost rising and high inflation, the real income of the middle class dipped. Popular discontent in West Bengal reached the brink of a political catastrophe. In midst of all this, the Congress in the state got divided; the breakaway Bangla Congress was inclined to join the communists to fight its parent party.[3] The communists and other non-Congress forces wasted little time to seize the opportunity.

Initially, the CPI(M) was hesitant to strike alliances. Unlike the CPI it refused to join Bangla Congress, a party representing the landlords and the rural rich, against the Congress. Of the three principal contestants in the 1967 state election fighting for 280 'seats' (single member constituencies), the CPI/Bangla Congress-led People's United Left Front (PULF) got 77, the CPI(M)-led United Left Front (ULF) got 74 and the Congress got 127.[4] Both CPI(M) and Bangla Congress fared well, winning 43 and 34 seats respectively. West Bengal's first non-Congress ministry seemed at a striking distance should PULF and ULF join hands.

Although it was not an easy choice for the CPI(M), a party anxious to preserve its radical image, the two merged into a United Front in March 1967. Bangla Congress leader Ajoy Mukherjee was elected the Chief Minister and CPI(M) politburo member Jyoti Basu his deputy.

The CPI(M), a party avowedly run on a set of firm political programmes, needed to explain why it came round to ally with non-left Bangla Congress. Claiming that the acute food shortage and near-famine condition had generated an extraordinary situation in the state calling for an exceptional response, it promised to sternly deal with the farmers' lobby to stop hoarding, which contributed to rapid escalation of food prices, and supported 'direct action' against the big farmers with the help of bureaucracy and peasant unions. Clearly, the CPI(M) did not see the problem of 'governing' as merely one of administering resources from the top. The party's emphasis was also on class action from below. With possible violence looming large, its partners in the United Front coalition got jittery, prompting its Food and Agriculture Minister Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, an astute Gandhian, to pit himself bluntly against the CPI(M). When Ghosh failed to meet the government's own target of procuring grains meant for selling at a controlled price from government-run shops, the tension between the CPI(M) and the non-left parties peaked.

The relentless tension wrecked the United Front from within. In early November 1967, Ghosh resigned and backed by 16 legislators formed a rival alliance – the Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) – receiving support from the Congress for staking claim to form a government without the left. Governor Dharma Vira, working in tandem with the Congress, was in no mood to wait, he asked Chief Minister Mukherjee to prove his majority within days, disregarding the latter's plea for the time he was entitled to. When Mukherjee failed the test, he was promptly dismissed. The CPI(M) claimed that the Centre unleashed its 'viciously undemocratic and conspiratorial machinations' because the party refused to give up its class commitments despite meeting all normal governmental obligations. The hurriedly forged PDF regime, fragile as it was, collapsed within days prompting the Centre to invoke President's rule in end-February 1968.[5]

A year later, on 9 February 1969, the state voted in a mid-term poll. Steeled by the recent experiences, the left parties closed ranks and formed a single coalition, the United Left Front. The CPI(M) was 'generous', allowing Bangla Congress to retain even those seats that belonged to the defectors from the party following the last election. The outcome was a rude shock for the Congress, which shrunk to only 55 seats against CPI(M)'s 83. The advantage of a pre-poll alliance in a multi-cornered fight was evident as the coalition won far more seats – 214 out of 280 – than its vote share, which was only marginally higher than the rest. Despite being the largest party, the CPI(M) offered the top job to Ajoy Mukherjee. In exchange, it kept some key portfolios like Home and General Administration, Land and Land Revenue, and Refugee Rehabilitation and Labour. The party saw its rising popularity as stemming from its capacity and readiness to combine some defining legislative steps with strident extra-legal initiatives at the field level.[6]

With the onset of the harvesting season in end-1969, as expected, clashes in the countryside and schism in the United Front saw a rapid escalation. CPI(M) insisted on using the government as an 'instrument of class struggle', Bangla Congress was determined to end the ongoing 'conflict and anarchy'. Chief Minister Mukherjee sat on a 72-hour fast holding his own government to account for fostering 'hatred and violence'. Though elements in the government sympathized with Mukherjee, none was eager to go overboard and accept the onus of breaking the coalition. The Centre was also chary of imposing presidential rule again; a decimated Congress stood as a testimony of the unpopularity of such measures. Eventually, the situation came to such a pass that Mukherjee resigned and President's rule was indeed imposed in April 1970.

While the allies blamed CPI(M)'s 'militancy' for the fall of government, leftwing factions within the party felt just the opposite. By opting to participate in a parliamentary government, they thought, the party was getting entrapped in its protocols at the cost of its radicalism. Their differences with the party's governmental actions reached a flashpoint in March 1967 over a peasant rebellion against local landlords in three villages of Siliguri subdivision – Naxalbari, Kharibari and Phansidewa.

In determining how it should respond to the rising peasants the party swung between two poles. While support for the upsurge was surely to destabilize the United Front government, suppressing the peasants looked like abandoning the project for rebellion. After some heated exchanges, the party decided to send police to put down the peasants. The action was strongly opposed by the leftists who eventually, in April–May 1969, broke with the CPI(M) and formed its own outfit – the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [CPI(ML)].[7]

A prime theatre for this second major split in Indian communist movement was the Krishak Sabha, the CPI(M)'s peasant union (more on this in chapter 2). As late as in 1966, the Krishak Sabha anticipated that peasant movement in the country was approaching a 'revolutionary turning point' (WBPKS, 1966a and, 1966b). The line was maintained even in the early United Front days when Harekrishna Konar, the peasant leader and land minister, welcomed extra-constitutional steps to procure 'substantial benefits', considering it unhelpful to depend entirely on the government. In support, the United Front in its *Programme* pledged to keep police away from 'democratic movements'[8] and insisted that there was no contradiction between class mobilization and governmental stability.[9] The position changed dramatically after Y. B. Chavan, the Union Home Minister, issued an ultimatum on 13 June 1967 threatening central intervention if the state government failed to put down the rebellion in Naxalbari (Ghosh, 1981, 73; Banerjee, 1980, 114).

Faced with the stark choice, the CPI(M) politburo decided to purge the 'adventurist' trend in the party which now had allegedly pushed the movement so far as to put the government in danger.[10] The so-called adventurists stood by the rebellious peasants in Naxalbari (and Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh), drew inspiration from Mao Ze Dong's leadership and received support from the Communist Party of China, which called the uprising 'the front paw of the Indian revolution'. They eventually formed the All India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) as they broke out of the CPI(M) to form the CPI(M-L) (see Dasgupta, 1974; Banerjee, 1984; Sen, 1980; Banerjee, 1980; Ray, 2002; Ghosh, 1981). Cleansed of the

'radicals', the CPI(M) clarified its position on a host of issues. It defended coalitions with non-left parties, which the radicals saw as 'class enemies', and reiterated that it would follow neither the Chinese nor the Soviets in international communist movement. In a draft resolution the central committee of the party expressed its determination to 'guard itself against any such outside interference and jealously defend its independence and independent political line'.[11] Alliance with so-called bourgeois parties was found necessary for a 'united action against a common enemy, at a particular stage of development, together with several other classes and parties with whom the proletariat has contradictions, including antagonistic contradictions at times'.[12] Critically, the CPI(M) was now prepared to join hands with smaller 'class enemies' to fight its bigger 'class enemy', the Congress.

To digress a little, the first lessons of coalitional politics were learnt by the left in the form of multi-class popular movements of the 1950s and 1960s, well before the United Front. Three mobilizations in particular – against a raise in tram-fares in Calcutta (1953), and two phases (1957–59 and 1966) of protest against acute food shortage, put West Bengal on the boil (Franda, 1971b). The communists no doubt gained the maximum mileage from these stirrings, but not until they gave up shreds of unilateralism, which had kept them apart from non-communist left and left-of-centre parties. As Prafulla Chakrabarti shows, the communists played a leading role in the United Central Rehabilitation Council (UCRC), an alliance that articulated the demands of a large and heterogeneous refugee population in and around Calcutta after the Partition of 1947. What the CPI leaders in UCRC could not achieve for years – galvanizing a simmering discontent into a flashpoint of popular unrest against the government – became possible in 1953 when another alliance – the Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee (TFERC) – was rapidly formed against the raise of the tram fare by just a pice, i.e., one-sixty fourth of a rupee. However ridiculously low the amount may appear, the raise was widely seen as the last straw that an insensitive government placed on a severely distraught population in punishing post-Partition conditions. 'The UCRC had fashioned a model for the joint

functioning of the parties of the Left' and the TFERC was 'created in its image … for conducting the joint struggle of the parties of the Opposition against the Establishment' (Chakrabarti, 1990, 330–31). In the course of the agitation, the UCRC aligned with its rival organization, the Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council (RCRC) that was attached to the Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party. This catapulted a city-based movement against a small change in tram fare (a 'politics of small change' – about which more later) in July 1953 to larger segments of the refugee population (lower middle class students and mostly unemployed youth), workers in the industry and toiling peasants in the countryside. 'The TFERC may be regarded as the present-day Left Front in embryo', writes Chakrabarti, '… the leadership now claimed to represent the radical opinion of the whole of West Bengal' (Chakrabarti, 1990, 337).

Another factor that united almost all segments of West Bengal's population in the 1950s and 1960s was food. Between 1951 and 1961, West Bengal's population rose by 32.2 per cent (India 21.6 per cent) with more that 6 million refugees crossing the border. This happened at a time when arable land devoted to foodgrain cultivation depleted to make for the drop in supply of raw jute from East Pakistan for the mills lining up the river Hooghly. The problem was compounded by illegal stocking of paddy by the hoarders, who sought to take advantage of the crisis through black market operations. The B. C. Roy government first attempted to regulate transactions by statutory procurement and penal measures of levy on evaders which, when proved counterproductive, had to be discontinued in September 1959 by opening the market and making up the shortage with supplementary supplies from the central government. The crisis, however, returned in an acute form in 1966, and P. C. Sen, the Gandhian Food Minister, revoked the control regime only to realize eventually that the desired results were difficult, if not impossible, with most violators of government control – the large and intermediate landowners, millers, transporters and shopkeepers – made up the machinery of his own Congress party. Such policy flip-flop and indeterminate action gave the opposition left a large room to manoeuvre. Since 1952, agitation and demonstration against the government's 'inaction' became almost a

routine affair. The CPI along with other left parties gelled into the Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) holding numerous rallies in the 1950s that peaked into a massive demonstration against the government on 31 August 1959.

Both UCRC and PIFRC were big steps for the left in learning the grammar of making and maintaining coalitions, which proved valuable later in the phase of the United Front governments and, indeed, for the Left Front thereafter. Three typical characteristics of this mode of action were: First, the communists considered their coalition with like-minded parties helpful to expand influence in various segments of the population across different parts of the state. They could now pose their partisan demands as broad-based and universal. Second, in the place of unilateralism of any sort consensus was preferred, creating conditions for joint action irrespective of multiple – often conflicting – political compulsions. Third, in cementing the coalition the regional government became both the target and the cradle of leftwing mobilization generating a mode of politics which, as we shall see, was instrumental both to open new possibilities as well as impose strict limits. However, despite such conciliatory mood, mutual differences between the three communist parties – CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML) – persisted.

The distance between the CPI and the CPI(M) widened as the former refused to extend support after the 1971 state election, allowing a frail Bangla Congress government to collapse within months. The CPI now moved closer to the Congress which, under Indira Gandhi, adopted numerous populist measures propelled by a nationalist wave following her successful military campaign against Pakistan. In the 1972 state election, the Congress won an unusually high number of seats, the CPI(M)'s tally shrunk to just 14 with a drop in its vote share by 6 per cent. Losing miserably and arguably unfairly, the CPI(M) and its allies boycotted the legislative assembly for the next five years.[13] Massive state repression set in, reaching its peak in the national emergency, all opposition voices were silenced in the state. The CPI, during most of these years, sided with the Congress.

For the CPI, the Congress now appeared progressively leftwing, so