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978-1-107-10226-2 - Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya

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Government as Practice

The Parliamentary Left in India is in deep trouble. Its legislative presence has shrunk both nationally and in the regions. The situation demands an open debate on possible options for building an alternative politics in a vastly unregulated rural and urban economy confronting corrupt government and corporate agencies.

This book studies a government run by a democratic-socialist coalition in postcolonial India. In the first ten years of being in power, the Left Front in West Bengal imaginatively produced a politico-administrative framework that created a substantial popular appeal keeping it in power for a record three decades and half. In those early years significant distributive policies for agrarian reforms were implemented and an elaborate structure of local representation introduced. The regime worked through an intricate web of disciplined activists – the ‘party’ – that mediated an ‘elevated’ domain of policies with an ‘embedded’ field of everyday practices involving various social classes. This offered a governmental conduct tuned to strategic alliances incorporating the rhetorical spirit of class struggle within the institutional protocols of a liberal constitutional system.

Based on empirical research and a critique of existing academic interpretations, the book captures such conduct within an inventive concept of ‘government as practice’. It shows how these practices gradually got entrapped in the politics of electoral renewal and ritualistic management of social peace, failing to keep pace with the growing aspirations of the poor for well-being and social justice in a rapidly changing economy. Enchanted by the developmental promises of neoliberal capital, the governmental Left now failed to blend popular politics with economic imperatives which alienated its basis classes and imploded the regime.

Arguing that a radical nostalgia geared to dogmatic clichés cannot help a democratic-socialist alternative in the present impasse, the book shows how decoding certain key signals of the Left Front can critically help re-imagine a new ‘government as practice’. Focused mainly on the predicaments of the Left in India, the book will have relevance for understanding a range of inclusive political options in wider fields of postcolonial democracy.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya is Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He was earlier at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. He has worked and published for many years in the areas of agrarian change, decentralization and democratic-socialist politics in India. A doctorate from the University of Cambridge, he has held visiting positions in several universities in India and abroad.

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*For Ma, who would
have been so relieved,
and Baba, who is.*

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This book waited for a closure for way too long. It is a peculiar problem of writing on the present. With each passing moment one experiences a shift in perspective calling into question some assumptions which until yesterday seemed firm. New circumstances demand a somewhat reworked frame of analysis, inviting a ripple of changes in the ordering of ongoing events and arguments. In 2011, the historical rout of the democratic left government in West Bengal brought a three and half decades of unbroken saga to its close. This gave the book, work for which started in 2009, a point of arrival.

The present impasse of the democratic left was felt simultaneously on several fronts: electoral, organizational, and more importantly, ideational. Here we will trace the lineages of the crisis more particularly through the government of the Left Front, a coalition that the left managed to maintain for a record 34 years in West Bengal. The government, in the first decade of its existence, took some important legislative steps to provide social and economic security for the disadvantaged groups and to promote local democracy for curbing the influence of the bureaucracy.

In the early years the left evolved an art of conducting its government, which the book calls 'government as practice'. It strategically combined top-down policies with the lived experience of different population groups. The art was perfected through popular movements and alliance-politics in the 1950s and the 1960s, which offered the backdrop for

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subsequent governmental projects of agrarian reforms and administrative decentralization in the late 1970s. This required a disciplined party and a complex structure of mass organizations for blending social democracy's ideological commitments with the everyday compulsions of postcolonial democracy. They helped the left consolidate its position among the rural and urban poor for an unprecedented duration.

However, the 'success' of the left in enlisting popular support also proved a bane, as its electoral triumphalism reproduced a stasis of predictability and famished its veins for infusing fresh ideas, so necessary to grapple with the contingencies of the 'new' economy in a rapidly transforming India. The gap proved costly, as the left failed to come up with an appropriate alternative to capital-led acquisition of farmlands, and faced a debilitating defeat with the alienation of its own constituency. Employing a mix of conceptual analysis and empirical interrogation, the book closely follows West Bengal's democratic left experiment from its record electoral run to its present political stalemate.

The book could not have been written if I did not have the opportunity of conversing over many years with Partha Chatterjee at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. His understanding of the region and its people in both their historical depth and contemporary complexities is unmatched. For me he brought home the point that the principal challenge for social science research is explaining a changing reality through conceptual tools that are widely connected yet sharply tuned to particular social, cultural and linguistic practices. With all my inadequacies, I owe a good deal of my intellectual curiosity to his generous time, his sharing of ideas and thoughts in the course of our numerous interactions.

The environment at the Centre has been central to my work. As an institution it always encouraged exchange across disciplinary boundaries within a convivial milieu through its regular seminars and M.Phil courses. Without a 'base' here, and the empathy of its current Director, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, I would not have had the chances of carrying out my fieldwork or getting a break during the last couple of months of intense writing. In working out my initial ideas, Anjan Ghosh was my most intimate sounding board. I have not known any other academic so

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intellectually motivated yet self-evasive, thoroughly informed yet openly sharing, firmly positioned yet tolerant of other viewpoints. He will ever be missed.

Some lines of thoughts here evolved in the course of prolonged exchanges at the Centre over the years with Anirban Das, Indrajit Mallick, Indranil Dasgupta, Janaki Nair, Jayati Gupta, Jyotsna Jalan, Keya Dasgupta, Kiran Keshavamurthy, Lakshmi Subramanian, Prachi Deshpande, Priya Sangameswaran, Prabir Basu, Rajarshi Ghose, Rimli Bhattacharya, Saibal Kar, Sohini Guha, Sugata Marjit, Sudipto Chatterjee and Trina Nileena Banerjee. The continuous provocation and questioning by Bodhisattva Kar, Manas Ray, Moinak Biswas, Pradip Bose, Pradip K. Datta, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Ritojyoti Bandyopadhyay and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay sharpened my understanding of the multivalence of politics. In addition, my time at the Centre would not have been so rewarding if I could not share the corridor, and the daily lunch conversations, with Manabi Majumdar and Rosinka Chaudhuri. In Pranab Kumar Das, I found someone to share many doubts and anxieties. He also helped me liberally for the statistical interpretations included in Appendix II. I received regular help from the Centre's Registrar, Debarshi Sen, and my colleagues at the library and the archives that included Abhijit Bhattacharya, Aseem Kumar Patra, Jayati Nayak, Kamalika Mukherjee, Kaliprasad Bose, Ranjana Dasgupta, Sanchita Bhattacharyya, Saumitra Chatterjee, Sheshadri Ghosal, Tapas Pal and the librarian Siddhartha Shankar Ray.

A few queries are carried here from a PhD thesis which I never published. Geoffrey Hawthorn, my supervisor at that time, played a critical part in its production. For me he remains a model supervisor, generous and considerate, allowing students a great deal of freedom to push arguments based, nonetheless, on demonstrable evidence. Much of my understanding of the post-Soviet leftwing politics evolved through discussions with a concerned group of students in Cambridge at that time including Andreas Janousch, Aveek Sen, Fiona Lortan, Jayanta Sengupta, Joya Chatterjee, Nandini Gooptu, Prakash Upadhyaya, Samita Sen, Selma Santos, Subha Mukherji, Subho Basu and Vinayak Srivastava.

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I also had the good fortune of growing up in a broadly leftwing familial milieu, where some who surrounded me had a deep attachment to politics, either as activists or academics. Of my paternal uncles, Sankarnarayan was a disciple of M. N. Roy in his Radical Humanist phase, Natanarayan and Naranarayan were both incarcerated for their communist activities in the late-1940s, Sundarnarayan worked as a courier when the party was underground. In the extended family circle on my mother's side, political discussions and differences were rife among a large set of uncles and aunts who were either teachers or politically committed journalists. They included, among others, Alaka and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, Asok Majumdar, Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, Harbans Mukhia, Kumares Chakraborty and Sailen K. Pande. My interest in social and political affairs owes much to what I picked up in the course of recurrent conversations with all of them.

I have received cooperation from a number of individuals and institutions. My teachers from the days in Calcutta University, especially Amitabha Chandra, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Samir Das and Sobhanlal Dattagupta played a crucial role in shaping my life in the academia. Some material used in chapter 4 of this volume stem from a research project on rural West Bengal headed by Dilip Mookherjee of Boston University and Pranab Bardhan of University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful for their insights and comments. I also benefitted from my academic interaction with Binitha Thampi and D. Narayana of the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, and Glyn Williams of University of Sheffield during our comparative study of Kerala and West Bengal. Kolkata regularly hosts a lively exchange between international scholars across disciplines thanks to the initiatives of the likes of Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Paula Banerjee, Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Subhas Chakraborty and Suhit Sen of the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group. Ranabir Samaddar of the same organization stands out as one of the city's most affectionate and agile intellectuals. Members of the Pratichi Trust had been especially helpful with their enormous field-data in the areas of human development. This book would have been much poorer without the generosity of Kumar Rana, the Project Director of Pratichi, who

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combines his inimitable energy with intimate knowledge of the ground level reality. The Lokniti group of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, especially Banasmita Borah, K. C. Suri, Sanjay Kumar, Suprio Basu, Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Yogendra Yadav had always been generous in sharing election-related data.

A leaner and rudimentary version of the chapter on the school teachers in democratic left politics first evolved in the 1990s as a collaborative research work with some colleagues at the Centre for Political Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University. One cannot but recall Aswini Ray, Balveer Arora, Bishnu N. Mohapatra, C. P. Bhambhri, Gurpreet Mahajan, Kuldeep Mathur and Zoya Hasan for their good wishes. Over the last couple of years Niraja Gopal Jayal, Pralay Kanungo and Sudha Pai constantly nudged me to complete this book. Shubhra and Kunal Chakrabarti, Sheila and Ramprasad Sengupta and Sanku Bose warmly opened their doors for me during my stay on campus.

My special debts are to a large pool of friends. Some – like Bhaskar Roy, Prafulla Dasgupta, Shantanu Ghosh (who shockingly passed away two years ago), Srikumar Mukhopadhyay and Ujjal Chakrabarty – were neighbourhood friends whose solidarity has withstood the test of time. My bonding with Indrapramit Roy stayed firm since I started school and merged into an enlarged circle of close mates that includes Aditi Chatterjee, Anindya Dutta, Somnath Mazumder and Subha De. Our days and nights in Shantiniketan, Kharagpur, and on the terrace of the Sambhunath Pandit Street house taught me a lot about ‘life’ in general and made me what I am today. Debashis Sen continues to ward off my complacency with his argumentative counterpoints on anything and everything from many seas away. Manidipa Sen still showers unconditional affection that only a childhood friend can. I consider myself fortunate to find a solid band of buddies in Anamitra Chaudhuri, Aparajita Dasgupta, Arun Ganguly, Chaitali Basu, Damandeep Singh, Debjani Sengupta, Franson Manjali, Jayanta Roy, Lili Mazumder, Malini Basu, Rita Ghosh, Sharmila Purakayastha, and Sukriti Lahori. Thank you all for your love and care. Over the years, Alope Mukhopadhyay, Anita Agnihotri, Debjani Deb Sengupta, Satyabrata Chakrabarty, Shyamaprasad Basu, Soma Dattagupta

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and Sweta Ghosh have become sources of infinite warmth and fondness. In more recent years, Maidul Islam, Prasenjit Bose, Rajesh Bhattacharya, Subhas Singha Roy, Swagato Sarkar and Zaad Mahmood revived the pleasure of politically charged addas in office or at roadside cafes. My students Koyel Lahiri and Praskanva Sinharay continue to overwhelm me with their many thoughtful gestures and humane qualities. Rajashree Choudhury and Runa Chakrabarty gave me a home away from home during a stint at Claremont Graduate University. And most recently, in Göttingen, Lalit Vachani, Michaela Dimmers, Sebastian Schwecke and Srirupa Roy were unflinching in their kindness and camaraderie.

The book uses some material from fieldwork in rural West Bengal that began way back in the 1990s. But for an active support of different political parties, especially of their peasant unions, the fieldwork could simply not have been possible. My biggest debt is to Benoy Krishna Choudhury, the Left Front minister in charge of land and land reforms, who was also a peasant leader of redoubtable integrity. He helped me get in touch with other left leaders such as Tarun Roy and Surjya Kanta Mishra in Medinipur, Nakul Mahato in Purulia, Jiten Mitra in Birbhum among others. Jiten Mitra gave me access to his massive collection of rare Krishak Sabha documents, a close reading of which was vital for some of the arguments made here. I also received generous cooperation from several ordinary activists and prominent personalities of different political parties, many of whom wanted to remain anonymous. Among those whose short and long contacts can be mentioned are Ashok Ghosh, Biman Bose, Debashis Chakraborty, Gautam Deb, Gunadhar Maity, Hrishikesh Maity, Mukul Roy, Nirbed Roy and Nirupam Sen. Special thanks to Chittabhushan and Malati Dasgupta, the builders of a distinctive Gandhian ashram in Majhihira village, and Prabha, Pratap and Prasad Dasgupta, for hosting me during my work in Purulia. In the course of my recent fieldwork, I received excellent support from research associates including Abhijit Jana, Anirban Seth, Debalina Jana, Dolonchampa Chakraborty, Kanchan Mandal, Mukhlesur Rahaman Gain, Partha Sarathi Banerjee, Suparna De, Sutapa Ghosh and Tania Goldar.

I would like to thank Qudsiya Ahmed and Suvadip Bhattacharjee of

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Cambridge University Press for the professionalism and care they have shown with their prompt, friendly and meticulous responses to all my queries.

Finally, I found in Bijoy Prosad Mojumder, my father-in-law, a rare combination of calmness and courage in the face of life's heaviest odds. My father, Dibyanarayan, remains a close friend, and still absorbs my tantrums with a wide smile. I have always admired his ability to find joy in the simplest of things, and his easy ways of dealing with life's many ups and downs. My mother, Mukti, taught me that an act of dissent need not be noisy. Her patience and hard work gave us a stable home while she rushed between household chores and responsibilities at work. As I sign off I fondly remember my grandmother, Charubala, whose love for me was strictly unconditional. And last, not least, I cannot but express my deep gratitude for Debjani, my comrade-in-arms and the most irreverent interlocutor, who has stood by me through happy and not-so-happy times.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABPTA	All Bengal Primary Teachers’ Association
AICCCR	All India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries
AIKS	All India Kisan Sabha
APL	Above Poverty Line
ASSOCHAM	Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry of India
BDO	Block Development Officer
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BLRO	Block Land Revenue Officer
BPL	Below Poverty Line
BUPC	Bhumi Uchchhed Pratirodh Committee
CITU	Centre of Indian Trade Unions
CMIE	Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy
CCIF	Cominform Communist Information Forum
CPI	Communist Party of India

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ABBREVIATIONS

CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPSU	Communist Party of Soviet Union
CrPC	Code of Criminal Procedure
DFID	Department for International Development
EAP	Externally Aided Project
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GOI	Government of India
GoWB	Government of West Bengal
GP	Gram Panchayat
IBM	International Business Machines
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KJRC	Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee
KUBJRC	Krishak Uchchhed Birodhhi O Janaswartha Raksha Committee
LS	Lok Sabha
LSS	Lok Sevak Sangha
MLALAD	MLA Local Area Development
MNC	Multi-national Corporations
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPLAD	MP Local Area Development

ABBREVIATIONS

NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NES	National Election Survey
NKID	New Kolkata Industrial Development
OBC	Other Backward Castes
PDF	Progressive Democratic Front
PDS	Public Distribution System
PIFRC	Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
PULF	People’s United Left Front
RAF	Rapid Action Force
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RCRC	Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SC	Scheduled Castes
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SRD	Strengthening Rural Decentralization
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
SSK	Shishu Shiksha Kendra
ST	Scheduled Tribes
SUCI	Socialist Unity Centre of India
SUCI(C)	Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist)
TFERC	Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee
TMC	Trinamool Congress

ABBREVIATIONS

UCRC	United Central Rehabilitation Council
ULF	United Left Front
UNCHR	United Nations Commission on Human Rights
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
VDC	Village Development Council
VEC	Village Education Committee
VS	Vidhan Sabha
WBIDC	West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation
WBLA	West Bengal Legislative Assembly