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Left Front Govt: Bastion of Left Democratic Forces

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The existence of the Left Front government in West Bengal for 25 years is a remarkable record. The achievements during this long tenure in government is chronicled in the subsequent articles appearing in this issue. The focus of this introductory piece is to place the Left Front government in the context of the CPI(M)'s understanding on participation in state governments and its relationship with the strategy and tactics of the Party. This article also assesses the impact of the Left Front government on national politics over the last two and a half decades. The significance of the quarter century rule of a Left government which is headed by a Communist Party in a state with a population of over 80 million (the fourth largest in India) cannot be underestimated.

I

The CPI(M) has been participating in state governments for more than three decades. Prior to that, the first Communist ministry headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad was formed in Kerala after the united CPI won a majority in the assembly elections in 1957. Based on the programmatic understanding provided in para 112 of the Party Programme, which was adopted in 1964, the Central Committee of the Party spelt out its understanding on joining the state governments in 1967 after the general elections. In its Political Report on 'New situation and the new tasks before the Party', the scope and the potential role of the state governments in which the CPI(M) would be involved were elaborated.

The Party Programme had stated that : "Even while keeping before the people the task of dislodging the present ruling classes and establishing a new democratic state and government based on the firm alliance of the working class and the peasantry, the Party will utilise the opportunities that present themselves of bringing into existence governments pledged to carry out a programme of giving immediate relief to the people. The formation of such governments will give great fillip to the revolutionary movement of the working people and thus help the process of building the democratic front."

It is this tactical direction provided in the Programme which was

fleshed out by the 1967 report keeping in mind the then prevailing political situation. For the first time, the Congress party suffered a serious blow after the 1967 general assembly elections when it lost in nine states. Non-Congress state governments came into office in all these states. Of these, in two states – Kerala and West Bengal – the CPI(M) decided to participate in the united front governments which were formed.

The CPI(M) decided to participate in the united front governments in Kerala and West Bengal since the Left and democratic forces were in a predominant position. The CPI(M) decided not to join other non-Congress governments. The consideration was, whether the CPI(M) and other Left and democratic forces were in a position to influence the policies and the course of such governments. The Party did not want to tail the bourgeois parties in the non-Congress alliances, if its independent strength was minimal and inadequate.

Defining the scope of these governments, the report stated: “In a word, the UF governments that we have now are to be treated and understood as instruments of struggle in the hands of our people, more than as governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and substantially give relief to the people. In clear class terms, our Party’s participation in such governments is one specific form of struggle to win more and more people, and more and more allies for the proletariat and its allies as the struggle for the cause of people’s democracy and at a later stage for socialism.”

It was based on this understanding that the CPI(M) worked in the united front governments of West Bengal and Kerala. The life of these governments were relatively short. In West Bengal, the 1967 government existed for nine months followed by the 1969 mid-term elections, which saw its return and its continuation till 1970 when it was dismissed by the Central government. In Kerala, the 1967 ministry lasted till October 1969.

In this period, the Party gathered rich experience in running governments and utilising the stints in government to foster struggles and expand the class based movements. The best example is the land struggle unleashed in the 1967-1970 period when Jyoti Basu was the Home Minister and Harekrishna Konar was the Land Reforms Minister in the united front government. The struggle by the peasants to occupy the benami lands and the surplus land above the ceiling law led to nearly six lakh acres being taken over from the landlords. The ruling classes were alarmed by this development.

The Congress party which had weakened on the all-India plane after the 1967 general election hit back with renewed vigour under the leadership of Indira Gandhi after the split in the Congress in 1969. In Kerala too, the policy of "administration and struggle" saw the sharpening of the conflict with landlords and vested interests and this was reflected within the united front when an anti-CPI(M)

combination, which included the CPI, arose.

It took the tumultuous years of 1970s which saw big struggles including the historic railway strike, the advent of the emergency and the defeat of authoritarianism for the reforging of Left unity to begin.

The 1967 report had talked of the role of the non-Congress governments and, in particular, the "democratic non-Congress governments" which were set-up in West Bengal and Kerala. The victory of the Left Front in June 1977 in West Bengal brought about a government comprising only the Left parties. It was not merely a democratic or non-Congress government. Further, the Left Front won a two-thirds majority getting 228 out of the 294 seats in the Assembly. The CPI(M), on its own, won an absolute majority with 177 seats.

The defeat of authoritarianism in the wake of the Emergency, the favourable national and international situation and the strength of the CPI(M) and the Left Front in the Assembly with a solid majority made it possible, for the first time, for a Left-led government to function in a stable manner in the state. These factors were the basis for a Left-led state government, for the first time, completing its full term of five years despite the severe limitations imposed on the state government under the Constitution.

The implications of the longevity of the Left Front government began to be realised gradually. The perspective set out in the 1967 report proved to be fruitful in dealing with the situation in which the united front governments functioned. These were governments with no majority for the Left and which had to face the brunt of a hostile centre and a gang up of anti-Communist forces within the two states. The formulation stated that these governments "are to be treated and understood as instruments of struggle in the hands of our people, more than as governments that actually possess adequate power that can materially and substantially give relief to the people". It correctly stressed the limitations of a state government within the constitutional structure and the necessity to use these governments as instruments of struggle. But the understanding was that these governments would be short lived. So while providing some immediate relief to the people, all efforts should be made to mobilise the people, the emphasis was on utilising the governments as instruments of struggle for winning more and more people to the side of the Party and the people's democracy. Underlying this approach was also the overall framework of the Party's understanding in the late 1960s that the struggle for people's democracy will progress rapidly given the favourable correlation of forces internationally -- an understanding which also permeated the Programme of the Party adopted in 1964.

Experience of the Left Front government in West Bengal over the

years necessitated a reappraisal of this approach. This was mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the Party had to arrive at a correct conclusion about the longevity of the Left Front government. Secondly, the changed context of the international and national situation which came into being in the nineties.

Right from the outset, the twin policies of implementation of land reforms and revitalising and institutionalising the three-tier panchayat system were the basis for the advance of the CPI(M) and its political influence among the rural masses. By the end of the first term of the Left Front government, 8 lakh acres of surplus land had been distributed to the landless. In 1978, the first elections to the three-tier panchayat system were held which led to the Left Front winning 38,468 seats out of the 66,000 seats for which elections were held. The CPI(M) alone won 34,445 seats which was over 60 per cent of the seats.

Successive terms of the Left Front governments expanded and consolidated in these two areas. It is this unique record of the CPI(M) in advancing the interests of the rural poor which gave it a sound and stable mass base. The post-1977 period also proved to be different from the earlier period. The divisions in the ruling classes which were reflected in the conflicts between the bourgeois-landlord parties resulted in the Emergency, but they continued even after 1977.

The success of the Left Front in 1977 was widely seen as a victory for the democratic forces in the anti-authoritarian struggle. It was not possible for the ruling classes to isolate the CPI(M) and the emerging united Left in the manner in which it was done in the 1969-70 period. A far cry from the days when Atal Behari Vajpayee, the leader of the Jan Sangh, speaking in the Lok Sabha in 1971 demanded harsher measures against the Marxists in West Bengal, including the use of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act.

Not that there was any respite for the Left Front government from hostile attacks. Here again, it was the Congress party, which took the lead in 1980s. After the return of Ms. Gandhi to power in 1980, repeated efforts were made to create difficulties for the functioning of the state governments. The Rajiv Gandhi government from 1984 to 1989 continued with this hostile approach. Even the clearance for a petrochemical project in Haldia took nearly a decade.

Fighting the Communists provided the impetus for the Congress, the major bourgeois-landlord party, to support a variety of divisive forces. At a time when the Congress was professedly fighting such forces which threatened national unity in Punjab, Assam and elsewhere, it had no hesitation in giving tacit support to the Gorkhaland agitation which saw large scale violence and the killing of over 100 cadres and activists of the CPI(M).

The international dimension of the hostile manoeuvres against the Left Front government was exposed by the air dropping of arms in Purulia in 1994 which marked a new stage in the conspiracies against the Left Front government. One of the main actors in the conspiracy, Peter Bleach, who is now serving a sentence in jail, has confirmed that the arms were meant for use against the Communist government in West Bengal. The immediate recipients being the fascistic Anand Marg which has international connections.

If the Congress Central governments and its party units in West Bengal were spearheading the anti-Communist campaign in the earlier phase, the durability of the Left Front government invited attacks from another source in the recent years. This has emanated from Trinamool Congress-BJP combine -- a formation which came into existence after the BJP assumed power at the Centre in 1998. The BJP with its visceral anti-Communism found the Trinamool an ideal instrument to rally the landlords and neo-rich elements to mount this attack.

The 1999-2000 period witnessed intense attacks, planned and sponsored by this combine. In the space of a few months in a triangular area covering parts of Midnapore and Hooghly districts, armed gangs spread terror and drove away scores of CPI(M) activists and cleansed large areas of Communist influence. This attack too was foiled and rolled back. A heavy price was paid with 300 CPI(M) and Left Front workers being killed. The assembly elections of May 2001 signalled the defeat of this latest round of conspiracy against the Left Front government.

The development of a strong base for the Communist movement in West Bengal is the best example of the creative application of Marxism to Indian conditions. Under the present set-up, State power resides in the Centre and the state governments have limited powers under the Constitution. Though called a Union of states, in practice, all the major powers of the Indian State vest with the Centre.

The innovative approach to participation in the state governments worked out by the CPI(M) on the basis of the experience gained from the time of the first Communist ministry, and of the United Front governments in the late sixties was further developed with experience of the Left Front government in West Bengal. Belying the earlier expectation, the Left Front government has lasted for two and a half decades. The formulation in the Programme adopted in 1964 that such government should provide "immediate relief" to the people cannot hold good any more. It has to be extended in the light of the achievements and progress made in various spheres. That is why, in the Programme which was updated in the year 2000, the section on the Party's participation in government talks about carrying out "a programme of providing relief to the people and strive to project and implement alternative policies within the

existing limitations". Projecting and implementing alternative policies within the existing limitations has assumed greater importance given the longevity of the Left Front government of West Bengal.

A new course for rural development building upon the land reforms implemented, became essential. New social relations and aspirations existed in the rural areas. Industrialisation and urban development acquired a priority in the current phase. The small scale industries sector had made good progress but it was necessary to go into new areas with advanced technology. The democratisation of society through the strengthening of local bodies and decentralisation had to be carried forward. The quality of public education and health system had to be improved. It was not possible to run the government with makeshift policies, when the whole framework of Central policies had changed.

The context in which a more long term approach had to be devised was also different. A big change had taken place between the first fifteen years of the Left Front government and the subsequent decade. The entire world situation changed with the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the change in the correlation of forces in favour of imperialism. The impact of the imperialist driven globalisation was directly felt in India. The policies of liberalisation, accepting the neo-liberal framework set out by the IMF and the World Bank brought about a new environment in which the Left Front government had to operate.

The unfolding of this new phase of liberalisation and coping with its pernicious onslaught had to be squarely met. The CPI(M)'s framework for running the state government consisted of two aspects:

Firstly, the limited powers given under the states list of the Constitution are to be used effectively in areas like land reforms, school education, panchayat system and partially the police and labour machinery. Policies in these areas would help to expand the mass base of the Party and rally wider sections around the Left and democratic platform.

Secondly, in those areas where real power exists only with the Centre and these are the key levers of State power like the bureaucracy, financial resources, judiciary and economic policy, the state governments functions under severe limitations. Here the struggle for alternative policies have to be conducted in West Bengal as part of the all-India movement. The Central framework of policies cannot be altered, or, transcended in West Bengal alone. At the same time, policies had to be devised to protect the people's interests and livelihood.

With the advent of the liberalisation and abandonment of the old

State-sponsored path of capitalist development, the policies of the Left Front government and the tactics of the mass movement had also to change. In December 1994, the Central Committee adopted a resolution on the "Role of the West Bengal Left Front government in the context of the new economic policies". The resolution stated: "Unlike in 1985, when the struggle was against the discrimination of the Centre, with its power of licensing and regulation of industry against West Bengal today with deregulation and delicensing it is upto the Left Front government to initiate steps to attract capital investment in West Bengal. This can be done only by allowing greater investment of private capital in various sectors. This is the basis on which the Left Front government has to adjust its policies in West Bengal to meet the new situation brought about by the Centre's policy of liberalisation...."

"The Left Front government's policies should be in defence of the public sector in core areas, retaining the state intervention in the infrastructure development and in social infrastructure like health and education while actively canvassing for fresh capital investment in the sectors such as electronics, petrochemicals and other specialised areas which cannot be developed with government funds. In every forum where official policies are debated, the Left Front government must clearly set out the alternative policies possible in the present situation and in the long term and this should be the basis for our Party's propaganda and mobilisation among the masses."

After nearly a decade of the policies of liberalisation, the sixth Left Front government was elected in May 2001 once again with the two-thirds majority. A cabinet with Buddhadeb Bhattacharya as the Chief Minister took office. It became necessary for the Party to chalk out a more systematic approach on how to deal with the situation wherein the state government has to work within the liberalisation framework of the Central government. The steps to dismantle the public sector, reduction of public investment, cutbacks of public expenditure on public services and the social sector were all creating serious difficulties for the state government. Further, the Centre was making it contingent on the state government to implement its policies for receiving funds. The adverse consequences were being felt by the state government with the deepening fiscal crisis and the limited capacity of the state government to intervene in economic matters.

It was in this context that the state conference of the West Bengal unit of the CPI(M) held in February 2002 discussed this issue thoroughly and adopted a resolution on "Left Front government and our tasks". Streamlining government's expenditure; securing investment for new industrial projects; provision of adequate facilities for small and marginal farmers to sustain agricultural

production; innovative schemes for generating employment and improvement of health and education facilities constituted some of the directives.

The Party was also enjoined with certain responsibilities to mobilise the people for effective implementation of government schemes and ensuring proper coordination between the people and the administration. A set of demands to the Central government, to ensure that the commitments made to the people were fulfilled, constituted an important part of the resolution which will form the basis for popular mobilisation and rallying other states on common demands.

Noting the circumstances in which the Left-led governments have to function, the Political Resolution of the 17th Congress of the Party stated: "Both the West Bengal and Tripura governments have to work under the severe constraints imposed by the economic policies of the Centre and the withdrawal of the State from economic activities. We should explain to the people frankly the situation and devise measures which can effectively fulfill our commitments to them."

The record of the 25 years generates the confidence that this challenge too will be met successfully by the West Bengal government. The CPI(M) is committed to the basic postulates set out in the Programme regarding the state government that it leads: Such a government will stand with the people and provide whatever relief is possible within the existing limitations; it should formulate and implement policies in a manner which is different from that of the bourgeois-landlord state governments; it will continue to mobilise the people in the struggle to implement alternative policies.

The Left Front government of West Bengal by its policies and performance can aid the struggle against the BJP-led government's policies in a big way. The Left Front government's role will immensely strengthen the all-India struggle not only against the economic policies but also in building the Left and democratic front which is essential to bring about a change in the correlation of forces.

II

The vital importance of the Left Front rule for the Communist movement in India cannot be overemphasised. When the CPI(M)-led Front won the elections for the first time in 1977, the international situation was favourable for the progressive forces in general. The national liberation struggles were at a high pitch. Vietnam has been liberated and re-unified after an epochal struggle, two years earlier in 1977. The liberation struggles in southern Africa, in Angola and in Mozambique were advancing. The socialist bloc seemed capable of thwarting the manoeuvres of imperialism. From that time to now, there has been a drastic change. The Left Front government went

through this whole period and witnessed the transition to a more hostile environment in 1990s. In the last decade, when the Left has been under siege internationally, the Left Front fought three state assembly elections -- in 1991, 1996 and 2001 -- and won decisively. Similarly, the Left emerged victorious in two rounds of panchayat elections involving the entire rural population held in 1993 and 1998.

At the national level, the 25 years have seen seven successive governments at the Centre and nine Prime Ministers. When Jyoti Basu first became the Chief Minister, there was the Janata Party-led coalition government headed by Morarji Desai. It was followed by the return of the Indira Gandhi led Congress government, the Rajiv Gandhi government, the V.P. Singh led National Front government (an interim six-month Chandrashekhar regime), the Narasimha Rao led Congress government, the United Front governments under Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral and finally, the BJP-led Vajpayee government since 1998.

When the country as a whole is faced with the offensive of the communal forces led by the RSS combine, West Bengal has maintained communal harmony. It is a state with a substantial Muslim minority population of 24 per cent. The Left Front government while firmly defending the rights of the minorities has also refused to compromise with fundamentalist forces for short-term gains.

It is the uninterrupted presence of a Left Front government in West Bengal that provided a constant base for the projection of a Left and democratic alternative at the national level. On every major issue -- political, economic and social -- which arose in this period, the intervention of the Left has been enhanced by the stance of the Left Front government.

The strength of the CPI(M) and the Left in West Bengal has boosted the Left profile in national politics. The bulk of the Left MPs in Parliament have come from West Bengal. The state has contributed 70 to 75 per cent of the Left members in both Houses of Parliament. It is the mainstay for the parliamentary representation of the Left.

The Left and democratic alternative policies include the implementation of land reform, decentralisation of powers at all levels, stepped up adequate State expenditure on education and health and expansion of these sectors, strengthening the public distribution system, stepped up public investment in agriculture and strengthening of the public sector in key sectors, regulating foreign finance capital flows and determining foreign direct investment according to the national priorities. In all these areas, the policies of the Left Front government working under limitations have added to the credibility of the Left's fight against the IMF-World Bank dictated path of development.

The Left Front government's firm stand in defence of secularism and refusal to compromise with the communal forces in contrast to the dubious record of various other state governments have provided teeth to the Left's consistent opposition to communal ideology and politics. In particular, the Left Front government has firmly dealt with the activities of the Hindutva forces whatever they sought to create communal tensions and threaten peace and harmony. West Bengal was able to show how communalism of various varieties can be kept in check if there is a government of firm political will to defend secularism. This is a significant achievement given the history of communal politics in the undivided Bengal before independence.

The consistent advocacy of the rights of States by the Left Front government of West Bengal has played a major role in putting the restructuring of Centre-State relations on to the national agenda. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu and his Finance Minister played an important role in the Srinagar conference on Centre-State relations held in 1983 which provided a sound basis for a federal structure. The convening, for the first time, of the Inter-States Council in 1989 by the V.P. Singh government was a concrete step in this continuing effort. The voice of the states for adequate devolution of financial resources, to halt the encroachment on states' rights was heard more effectively due to the able championing by the representatives of Left Front government in all national forums.

Time and again, it is the principled stance adopted by the Left Front government in defence of the rights of the working people which has checked the hand of the Central government when it sought to embark on legislation and policy decisions harmful to the working class and the common people. The Left Front of West Bengal has never seen itself as only the custodian of the rights of the working people of West Bengal, but of the entire country when it comes to all-India policy matters. On the rights of States, on protecting democratic rights of citizens, on decentralisation of powers upto the village level, on protecting the rights of minorities, on strengthening national sovereignty and self-reliance -- the Left Front government always spoken of on all these issues lending weight to the stand taken by the Left and democratic forces in the country.

West Bengal, under the Left Front government, also showed it is possible to take up social policies in the interests of the dalits and adivasis in such a manner as to render substantial gains to them without creating caste and social divisions. The steady advances made by the scheduled castes have not led to any upper caste backlash, nor are there atrocities against the socially oppressed sections. The polarisation created by the implementation of the Mandal Commission report and the caste based mobilisation common in other parts of the country have not affected the state. The steps

taken to provide joint pattas to women and enlarge their participation in economic activities and local bodies are also noteworthy.

Another area in which the Left Front government has enhanced the prestige of the Communists and the Left forces is in the setting of high standards of integrity and probity in public life. All the ministers and the elected representatives of the Left in the state legislature as public servants have shown what needs to be done to be committed to public service. The salaries of the ministers in the West Bengal Cabinet are the lowest in the country (apart from Tripura). The salaries, allowances and perks of the legislators are the least in West Bengal. Incidentally, an MLA in Bihar receives two to three times the salary and allowances available to a West Bengal legislator. The ministers and legislators of the CPI(M) pay levy to the Party on their salaries which leaves them with incomes not much higher than that of other Party cadres. Whenever a few cases of misuse of funds by elected representatives in the panchayat system have come to light, the Party has taken firm action by removing such persons from the membership of the Party. There is no loot of public funds by the elected representatives of the Left as is normal among ruling parties in other states.

III

The key to the Left Front government's success cannot be only its policies and the performance. The record of the performance is modest in certain spheres. There is still a high degree of bureaucratic sloth which thwarts many worthwhile governmental and private initiatives. The secret of its longevity and the tenacity of the popular support for a state government severely hampered by the bourgeois-landlord system lies elsewhere. It is in the realm of people's consciousness.

No other state government has aroused such hostility in the dominant bourgeois media. The vicious campaign conducted through the years by the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and similar newspapers displayed the naked class hostility under the cover of media criticism. The inflammatory campaign which involved a mix of lies and distortions was reminiscent of the way the *El Mercurio* and other right-wing papers in Chile conducted propaganda against the Allende government in 1972-1973.

It is a tribute to the organisation of the CPI(M) and the popular consciousness generated by the Party and the Left Front government that they could withstand the barrage of propaganda conducted by the dominant media in the state. West Bengal would be one of the few exceptions where the power of the modern bourgeois media was, to an extent, effectively neutralised. This by itself would merit a separate study.

Despite the most powerful and lethal anti-Communist propaganda, the people who remained loyal to the Left has been steady. In no assembly election has the Left polled less than 48 to 49 per cent of the vote. To be able to retain such a base through the ups and downs of the political situation in the country and the hostile international environment testifies to the political consciousness of the people.

The role of the Communist Party in creating this consciousness has been crucial. More than 30,000 Party cadres and activists are involved in running various aspects of the government administration and local bodies. Tens of thousands are in daily contact with the people, explaining the political situation, dealing with urgent problems of the people and leading them in different forms of struggle. This is a tribute to the Leninist principles of organisation, which have been so well mastered by the West Bengal unit of the CPI(M).

The critics from the Left often maintain that the existence of the Left Front government has actually acted as a dampner on class struggle in West Bengal. Nothing can be farther from the reality. The building up of a powerful peasant movement (the Kisan Sabha has a membership of one crore ten lakhs) is a result of ceaseless class struggles. The trade union movement in the state is the strongest contingent of the working class movement in the country. Every all-India action of different sections of the working class evokes the most widespread participation of the workers of the state.

The struggle to defend the Left Front government is itself a manifestation of the class struggle which has reached higher levels in the state than elsewhere. The 3,400 cadres and activists of the CPI(M) who were killed in the past 25 years under Left Front rule were part of this class struggle. The CPI(M) and the Left Front have not used the police and administrative machinery to suppress political opponents. Rather it is the reliance on political struggle and mass mobilisation which has enabled West Bengal to be free of the anti-democratic exercises so common in the states run by bourgeois parties. This again is not due to the CPI(M) and the Left parties alone, but stems from the higher level of democratic consciousness which has been created amongst the people.

The country as a whole has witnessed a rightward shift in the past one decade. The existence of a rightwing communal regime at the Centre and the recent events in Gujarat are pointers to the possibilities of an authoritarianism tinged with fascism. The existence of a Left Front government in West Bengal stands as an open challenge to these dark forces. That by itself makes the 25th anniversary of this popular government an occasion invested with great meaning.