

RED BENGAL'S RISE AND FALL

THE OUSTER OF West Bengal's Communist government after 34 years in power is no less of a watershed for having been widely predicted. For more than a generation the Party had shaped the culture, economy and society of one of the most populous provinces in India—91 million strong—and won massive majorities in the state assembly in seven consecutive elections. West Bengal had also provided the bulk of the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPM) deputies to India's parliament, the Lok Sabha; in the mid-90s its Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, had been spoken of as the possible Prime Minister of a centre-left coalition. The CPM's fall from power also therefore suggests a change in the equation of Indian politics at the national level. But this cannot simply be read as a shift to the right. West Bengal has seen a high degree of popular mobilization against the CPM's Beijing-style land grabs over the past decade. Though her origins lie in the state's deeply conservative Congress Party, the challenger Mamata Banerjee based her campaign on an appeal to those dispossessed and alienated by the CPM's breakneck capitalist-development policies, not least the party's notoriously brutal treatment of poor peasants at Singur and Nandigram, and was herself accused by the Communists of being soft on the Maoists.

The changing of the guard at Writers' Building, the seat of the state government in Calcutta, therefore raises a series of questions. First, why West Bengal? That is, how is it that the CPM succeeded in establishing such a broad and tenacious hold in this densely populated north-eastern state, when it failed to do so anywhere else in India, with the partial exception of Kerala? Second, what were the conditions in which the CPM first reached and then consolidated power in the province, in the 1970s and 80s? Third, how should their achievements in office be measured? Fourth, how to explain the party's recklessly thuggish treatment of the oppressed layers that form its natural base? Finally, what were the

WEST BENGAL



Key to districts:

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|------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 Darjeeling | 6 Malda | 11 Purulia | 16 Howrah |
| 2 Jalpaiguri | 7 Birbhum | 12 Bankura | 17 Calcutta |
| 3 Cooch Behar | 8 Murshidabad | 13 Hooghly | 18 South 24 Parganas |
| 4 North Dinajpur | 9 Bardhaman | 14 North 24 Parganas | 19 East Midnapore |
| 5 South Dinajpur | 10 Nadia | 15 West Midnapore | |

factors that undermined its long electoral hold on the government of West Bengal? What follows will attempt some provisional replies.

Bengali specificities

First, what accounted for the rise of the CPM in West Bengal, to a position of pre-eminence without parallel elsewhere in India? A large part of the answer must lie in the relative weakness of Congress in the province, and a distinctive social structure, especially on the land, after Independence. Historically, the Communist Party of India (CPI) that emerged from the anti-colonial struggle, though it never achieved popular appeal on a national scale, secured a substantial base in a number of states—Andhra Pradesh, Bengal, Kerala, Punjab—outside the Hindi-speaking belt which formed the central bastion of Congress support. Of these, Bengal came to be the most important. The birthplace of anti-British resistance in India in the first years of the twentieth century, and the principal centre of industry in the subcontinent, it offered a vortex of cultural renaissance, national awakening, peasant unrest and worker militancy, in which Communism took durable root.¹ Communists worked within the galaxy of revolutionary groups and underground cells active in the province. Promode Dasgupta, who would serve as West Bengal party secretary for nearly half a century, was formed in the Anushilan Samiti in the 1920s. Slightly younger, Jyoti Basu and Hare Krishna Konar worked as union and peasant organizers, often gaoled or beaten under the British.

This was a more radical setting than elsewhere in India at the time, and even Congress was not immune to it. Under the leadership of the Bose brothers—Sarat and Subhas—the provincial party tried to unite the majority Muslim and minority Hindu communities on a secular, socialist platform. This was anathema to the Marwari businessmen who bankrolled Gandhi. In 1937, at the urging of the millionaire magnate G. D. Birla, then based in Calcutta, the Congress High Command under Nehru, taking orders from Gandhi, forbade the provincial Congress to form a joint ministry with the pro-peasant, predominantly Muslim Krishak Praja Party in the Bengal Legislature. This sectarian decision, foreshadowing the Hindu chauvinism of its later years, sidelined Congress over the next decade, forcing the KPP into a coalition with the Muslim League, a landlord organization in Bengal, thereby helping to

¹ For an overview of the history of Bengal, see Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, 'Politics and Culture in Bengal', *NLR* 1/79, May–June 1973.

popularize the League and turn the KPP from socio-economic to communal issues. Any rapprochement between the Bengali Congress and the peasant movement was ruled out when Gandhi mounted a putsch against Subhas Bose, who had been democratically elected President of Congress in 1939, and had him expelled from the party in best authoritarian fashion.

During the Second World War, British policies helped to create a famine that led to an estimated 2 million deaths in Bengal. When, after the War, the British realized they would have to withdraw from the sub-continent, Congress—a 97 per cent Hindu party—remained in a weak position in Bengal, where there was a Muslim majority and provincial ministry. With Partition looming, Sarat Bose and Suhrawardy, heading the Muslim League in the province, came together on a platform for a united independent Bengal, against furious opposition from the Hindu Mahasabha, the ancestor of today's BJP. The national Congress leadership—Nehru was particularly vehement—joined forces with the Mahasabha, whose leader was subsequently rewarded with a Cabinet post in Nehru's government, to torpedo this prospect, instead forcing through a confessional division of Bengal between India and Pakistan, to ensure that the Hindu elite would retain at least control of its Western wing, around a third of the territory. Once India was independent, however, West Bengal was rapidly marginalized from the seats of power, its leverage drastically reduced in a political system whose centre of gravity lay in the cow belt of North India. The local Congress clung to office, but it was an outlier in the structure of Nehru's rule.

Social conditions

Partition reshaped Bengal's economy and society, catastrophically severing the industrial West from the agricultural East. Prior to 1947, Bengal had been the world centre of a burgeoning jute industry, but factories around Calcutta were now cut off from crop supplies in East Pakistan; the conversion of paddy fields in West Bengal to jute cultivation contributed to an acute food shortage after Independence. The largest estates and most fertile land went to East Pakistan, while millions of refugees—first and foremost, the Hindu former gentry, dispossessed and declassed by Partition—poured into West Bengal, to settle where they could. Those who managed to retain property there became burdened with down-and-out relatives (Bengali refugees were granted formal rights

to claim back property under the 1950 Liaquat–Nehru Pact, so did not receive the state support granted to those in the Punjab). West Bengal's caste structure was particularly localized and fragmented, therefore not as salient as that of the Cow Belt, but it still shaped the class hierarchy; if Brahmins were less entrenched, the educated castes predominated more than elsewhere, especially in politics, while rural capitalists relied on family trade and banking networks among Marwaris, believed to descend from Rajasthani merchant-caste migrants in the late 18th century. The landless and poor were always low-caste, Muslim or both. West Bengal had one of the highest proportions of Dalits in India, at 23 per cent of the state population, while Muslims made up 25 per cent, largely concentrated in the south-eastern districts along the 1947 border.

As far as land-holdings were concerned, the *zamindari* system, allowing titles to vast areas, had been nominally abolished by the Nehru government after 1947, but Partition made a reality of this in West Bengal. Though feudal landlords were no longer a force, however, the *jotedars*—traditional overseers with substantial medium-sized holdings, who formed the bedrock of Congress support in India—remained. But the majority of households had less than an acre, barely sufficient for subsistence production. The land-tenure system was therefore highly fragmented. Casual, seasonal employment, sometimes as little as three months a year, was typical in the paddy-producing areas that occupied a substantial portion of the state. Rice was the staple crop and chief food supply, along with pulses, oilseeds and vegetables, though cash crops such as jute and, in the highlands, tea were also produced. Sharecroppers or *bargadars*, usually with tiny plots of their own, worked half the land, with scant security of tenure and often subject to debt bondage. Land scarcity led to subinfeudation and complex employment patterns: the better-off might rent from the poor, while farmers could rely on hired labour, family efforts or waged work, depending on the season or circumstances. At Independence, agricultural production had been stagnant for nearly a century, despite this being one of India's most fertile regions. Electrification was almost unknown outside the cities; roads and tracks were largely unpaved.

In the aftermath of Independence, West Bengal's Communists agitated with other militants for famine and refugee relief. In the 1950s the party began to grow after a successful campaign of squatting and picketing state land led to some redistribution around Calcutta. Trade-union

membership rates were already higher in West Bengal than in the rest of India, and doubled between the mid 50s and mid 60s. Disillusioned middle-class migrants, living in settlements on the outskirts of Calcutta, were forced into the labour market. Skilled workers in engineering, chemical industries and clerical jobs had to deal with high unemployment rates: this layer formed the CPI's trade-union base. At the same time, the CPI's principal orientation was electoral: in the West Bengal state assembly elections, its share of the vote rose from 11 per cent, with 28 seats, in 1951 to 25 per cent, with 50 seats—nearly a fifth of the total—in 1962, when it became the official opposition to Congress in the state assembly.

Enemies on the left

The majority of West Bengal's Communists, and nearly all its trade unionists and rank-and-file militants, sided with the 'left' faction that would form the Communist Party of India–Marxist at its Calcutta conference when the CPI split in 1964. Amid heightened tensions at the time of the 1962 India–China border war, Dasgupta, Basu and others had campaigned against Nehru's jingoism and been gaoled, while others on the Central Committee backed Congress's 'patriotic war'. The contrasting positions, which principally involved the party's tactical orientation towards Congress, were framed as a strategy of a broad alliance against a 'feudal' Indian ruling class, on the one hand (CPI), or as working-class leadership against bourgeois rule, on the other (CPM).² At a time of rising class struggle and deepening economic crisis, both Communist parties continued to privilege the battle for office. In the 1967 West Bengal state assembly elections the CPM won 18 per cent of the vote, with 43 seats, and entered a governing coalition—the United Front, led by the Bangla Congress, a short-lived breakaway from the national party—as a junior partner. The CPM's Jyoti Basu became West Bengal's Deputy Chief Minister, while Harekrishna Konar was the Land Minister.

That May a peasant rebellion erupted in the village of Naxalbari in Darjeeling district, led by the CPM's peasant front. Konar attempted to mediate, trying to get the peasants to put down their arms, to no avail. West Bengal's Chief Minister dispatched security forces to repress the

² Nationally, the CPI claimed around 106,000 members after the 1964 split and the CPM around 119,000, although this was soon diminished by further splits. For a critical historical analysis, see K. Damodaran, 'Memoir of an Indian Communist', NLR 1/93, Sept–Oct 1975.

uprising, which was crushed with extreme brutality over the succeeding months. The CPM leadership's continuing participation in the United Front government that was undertaking state reprisals against a section of its own base precipitated another split in the party, leading to the formation of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist), pledged to a guerrilla strategy in the countryside, along Maoist lines. Naxalbari was a watershed for the CPM: Promode led a virulent campaign against the 'left-adventurists', which at times degenerated into armed conflict. Meanwhile in the cities, a food crisis and deep recession, worsened by the devaluation of the rupee, led to riots and mass protests. Grain shops were ransacked and their supplies distributed—an activity that became known, after the Calcutta district, as dispensing Dum Dum *dawai*, or medicine. Left militants took the lead in organizing general strikes, helping to popularize the *gherao*, or encirclement, as an effective tactic. The United Front coalition broke apart and the state's Centrally appointed governor seized the opportunity to impose President's Rule.

Between 1969 and 1971, successive state assembly elections—interspersed with bouts of President's rule—saw the CPM expand its rural and urban base in Bardhaman, West Bengal's coal-and-steel industrial belt as well as its biggest rice-producing area: mining and manufacturing districts stretch along the Damodar River between Asansol, Durgapur and the city of Bardhaman itself, making this one of the most populous regions outside the Ganges delta. In 1969, the party won 20 per cent of the vote, taking 80 state assembly seats; in 1971 it gained 33 per cent of the vote and 113 seats. Again in a United Front coalition headed by the Bangla Congress, and determined to avoid a second Naxalbari, the CPM pushed for a real degree of land reform. With population growth, West Bengal's land-to-person ratio was now desperate: less than a third of an acre per head. Konar's strategy was to combine mass mobilizations with land-redistribution measures already mandated by state law.³ Agricultural workers, sharecroppers and small farmers were called upon to identify land belonging to absentee owners, or *benami* holdings—illegal excess—and became enthusiastic witnesses. This on-the-ground effort enabled the CPM cadre to build up bases in the

³ According to the Constitution, the 17 state jurisdictions were entitled to set their own ceilings for land-holdings. In West Bengal, the 1953 Estate Acquisitions Act laid out the process for land appropriation ('vesting') and compensation; the 1955 Land Reforms Act stipulated ceilings of 5 to 7 hectares (roughly 12 to 17 acres) of irrigated land for families and 2.5 hectares (around 6 acres) for individuals.

countryside, dislodging the dominant Congress-supporting elite. Poor and landless peasants were mobilized to seize the land, marching in processions armed with bamboo sticks, axes and spears.⁴

At the same time, peasant insurrections were erupting in the countryside, led by the Maoist CPI–ML, while the imposition of martial law in East Pakistan, and subsequent Bangladesh liberation struggle, raised the question of a united—and red?—Bengal. The Congress government in New Delhi dispatched the Indian Army to forestall any such outcome—and to crush insurrectionary forces on both sides of the 1947 border in the process. The CPM was caught in the blowback of state repression, while at the same time mounting a further fratricidal assault on the Naxalites. Another bout of Presidential Rule put Congress back in power in 1972, and Konar's land reforms were swiftly reversed. Under Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a reign of terror was now unleashed against CPM and CPI–ML militants alike, along with trade unionists, peasant organizers and radical students. By 1973 there were nearly 18,000 political prisoners in West Bengal's gaols. The repression was so heavy-handed that the bullets and batons of the Emergency period, imposed by Indira Gandhi from 1975–77, seemed merely the continuation of an ongoing, Congress-led counter-insurgency campaign.⁵

Into office

When the long-overdue Lok Sabha elections were finally held in 1977, Congress was defeated for the first time since Independence, ceding power to the Janata Party, an unstable coalition of socialists, big capitalists and the Hindu far-right. Indira's party was evicted all across the country in the state-assembly elections held that summer: the Janata Party won over 46 per cent of the vote in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. In West Bengal the beneficiary of the nationwide anti-Indira swing was the CPM, whose cadre had behaved with great courage during the years

⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising*, London 1984, p. 137.

⁵ Data from the state Home Minister; an Amnesty International report later put the figure at 20,000, mostly identified as Naxalites, but many CPM members as well: 'Detention Conditions in West Bengal', reprinted in *Economic & Political Weekly*, 21 September 1974. The CPI supported the Emergency as necessary against reactionary forces, bringing themselves into disrepute and terminal decline.

of lead. The party campaigned on a minimal programme: release all political prisoners and provide basic relief to the poor. It won 35 per cent of the vote and a sweeping majority of 178 seats in the 294-seat West Bengal state assembly, by gaining ground in Howrah and Hoogly, in the east, and Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia and Midnapore along the state's western rim. The Janata Party took only 20 per cent of the vote in West Bengal, yielding 29 seats. Congress was reduced to 23 per cent of the vote, with a mere 20 seats.

The CPM further strengthened its position in 1977 by building a Left Front coalition, based on electoral agreements that became known as the 'Promode Formula', after the CPM's veteran General Secretary. Left Front parties would not run against each other; in each constituency, whichever party had garnered most votes in the prior election would stand unchallenged, on its own manifesto. The CPM's most important allies in the Left Front would be the All India Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, both commanding significant support in the Siliguri Corridor and tribal-dominated, relatively undeveloped North.⁶ In the 1977 state-assembly elections, the AIFB won 5 per cent of the vote, garnering 25 seats, and the RSP 3 per cent of the vote, rewarded with 20 seats. The CPM's allies were invited to join a Left Front government, with Basu as Chief Minister. Altogether, the Left Front commanded 230 seats, nearly four-fifths of the state assembly, and was backed by 45 per cent of the electorate.

After the experience of the 1960s and 70s, however—repeated imposition of President's Rule by Congress at the Centre; gaolings and beatings of party cadre—there was every reason to expect that, whatever its popular support, the CPM-led government in West Bengal would be short-lived. Dasgupta, Basu and the others were determined to avoid a re-run of the United Front experience, when gains in the countryside had been rolled back by Congress's reversal of land redistribution. Battered by repression, the CPM's membership was barely 40,000 when it fought the 1977 election. The leadership resolved to implement landmark reforms

⁶ AIFB: founded by Subhas Chandra Bose, now largely reduced to a cult of him; based only in West Bengal, mainly in Darjeeling and Cooch Behar in the Himalayan foothills. RSP: traces its origins to the Anushilan Samiti, like the CPM, but was never affiliated to the Comintern; a significant base among *adivasi* workers in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri, but also elsewhere in India.

that would buttress the party's position among the peasantry, politically and electorally, against the anticipated storms ahead.⁷ The Left Front government moved swiftly to set in place the three pillars of its agrarian programme: Operation Barga, registering sharecroppers' rights; a land-redistribution programme; and the animation of *panchayat*—village-council—democratic structures. Tactically, the aim was to utilize existing progressive legislation—of course, unimplemented—to avoid delays and obstructions from the Centre, since Presidential ratification was necessary for laws passed at state level.

Countryside consolidation

Operation Barga once again used mass mobilization to make a reality of laws already on the statute books. Sharecroppers were legally entitled to permanent and heritable cultivation rights, and due 75 per cent of their produce, or 50 per cent if the landlord supplied seeds, et cetera. In reality, since most contracts were verbal, *bargadars* had little legal recourse against evictions and exploitation; their share of the crop they harvested was rarely more than half and could be as little as a quarter. Even under British rule there had been campaigns to register sharecroppers, but the Left Front's version involved mass participation, in an atmosphere of real euphoria. The CPM and its allies established some 8,000 reorientation camps across the countryside between 1978 and 1982, where public meetings were held to air grievances and educate tenant farmers about their rights. Villagers were enlisted to verify claims. Though Operation Barga was a drive for registration, rather than enforcement, the state government now put the onus on landlords to disprove occupants' eligibility to *bargadar* rights. Some 1.2 million sharecroppers were registered in the first three years of the campaign, around two thirds of the total, and 30 per cent of all cultivators. They registered tenancy rights to an area of 1.1 million acres.

The Left Front's land-redistribution programme involved identifying plots above the legal ceilings and transferring them to the state, after compensation—a slow process. By law, appropriated lands were earmarked for either landless or marginal farmers, owning no more than an acre. The CPM's priority was to consolidate holdings, starting with marginal and small farmers. Individuals had to apply to their *panchayat*,

⁷ See Monobina Gupta, *Left Politics in Bengal*, Hyderabad 2010, esp. ch. 2.

which would ascertain eligibility and grant *pattas*, or deeds, accordingly. By the end of its first term in 1982, the Left Front had handed over 800,000 acres to 1,572,531 heads of households—small plots, not viable for market production, but enough for homestead allotments.⁸

But it was *panchayat* reform that effected the most significant shift in the political culture of rural West Bengal. Village self-government had been a Gandhian vision, formalized after Independence, though regulations were rarely followed: in West Bengal *panchayat* elections had not been held for nearly two decades in many areas; the councils had traditionally been run by powerful local families, to arbitrate on village disputes. Left Front reforms now instituted direct elections to the *panchayats*, under universal suffrage and proportional representation, in which candidates from any political party could stand. The village assemblies, whose meetings would be open to the public, were charged with drawing up development plans and distributing state and national funds. They were structured on three levels: *gram* (village), made up of representatives covering a population of about 12,000, from around 10 villages; block, for ten times that population; and state district, which was twenty times more again. In the 1978 *panchayat* elections, the Left Front won 69, 76 and 92 per cent of the seats for each respective tier, breaking—or at least, qualifying—the hold of rich peasants, rice-mill owners and moneylenders.

The efficacy of Operation Barga is much disputed. Sharecropping was already being replaced by lease cultivation for cash payments when it was introduced—landlords do not have to invest anything, can get a fixed payment or change tenants seasonally to increase rent. Registration in itself could not prevent evictions or low portions of the crop; the acreage affected was too low to make any great impact on overall productivity. The Left Front's land-redistribution programme was also small-scale, although it represented 20 per cent of all redistributed land in India. However, taken together with the Panchayati Raj and redistribution, Operation Barga helped shift social relations in the countryside by constraining the once unquestionable dominance of landlords in the battles that had rocked village life at harvest-time. Modest though the reforms were, the decentralized administration and

⁸ See the recollection of then Land Reforms Commissioner D. Bandyopadhyay, 'Land Reform in West Bengal: Remembering Hare Krishna Konar and Benoy Chaudhury', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 27 May 2000.

enhanced social and economic stability encouraged investment, which had previously been uneconomical in such a fragmented land-tenure system, and resulted in more work for agricultural labourers and the reduction of rural debt.

Over their first decade, the Left Front reforms appear to have facilitated a more egalitarian Green Revolution than took place in most other Indian states. Faster-growing varieties of rice—for multiple cropping, extending the harvest season—require irrigation, not just rainfall. *Panchayats* played a key role by distributing Central government funds for building infrastructure such as roads and tube-well irrigation, which also provided off-season jobs. Subsequently, total working days for agricultural labourers in West Bengal rose to the highest in India. Within the CPM's first two terms, increased productivity and year-round employment led to a rise in real wages. Debt bondage, which had been rife in the state, had virtually been eliminated. Historically plagued by famine, West Bengal was transformed into the rice bowl of India. Mean per capita consumption doubled in ten years and the rural poverty head-count dropped from nearly 60 per cent to under 35 per cent in the late 80s. Party cadre were instrumental in settling payment disputes, a key site of local struggle. Typically, short ritual strikes *preceded* wage negotiations: landlords agreed to the rate that the party set, just below the official minimum; middle farmers least able to afford to pay the basic wage would not have to lose out to more prosperous landowners. The CPM was thus able to cement its electoral base by mediating between different sectional interests. Its peasant front, the All India Kisan Sabha, grew from 1.2 million members in 1978 to over 7 million by 1987.

The political payoff for the CPM was the creation of a highly effective rural apparatus, an electoral machine perhaps unmatched elsewhere in the world. Contesting three different sets of elections—local, provincial, national—each staggered a few years apart, full-time CPM members were regularly engaged in brokering the needs of their electoral base in exchange for votes. Traditional factionalism and clientelism played a part in the *panchayats*, as branches of West Bengal's vote-bank. Local leaders often disbursed land and aid amongst their own *dol*—their circle of kin, caste and economic dependents—just as in other parts of India. On the other hand, the Panchayati Raj made local power-brokerage participatory: support had to be courted from those who had previously been excluded from any decision-making, while party membership

became a relatively meritocratic sorting device for distributions among the poor. In conditions of scarce resources, the *panchayats* stood in the middle of a pyramidal system of patronage, with Alimuddin Street, the CPM's HQ, at the apex.⁹

Urban outcomes

In the cities, the advent of the Left Front put an end to the chaos and violence—verging on urban warfare—of the Siddhartha Shankar Ray years. Although the traffic congestion and power shortages in Calcutta would continue, the CPM made a concerted effort to rebuild the public administration and to extend its hegemony in the process. Schoolteachers' pay had nearly trebled by the mid 80s, to match that of central-government employees. Police wages were also raised and a significant portion of the ranks was unionized; the police force as a whole became a bastion of support for the CPM. Public-sector workers, bank employees and airport staff were well served by CPM-affiliated trade unions. The party's intellectuals were given a free hand to restore and administer the universities and cultural institutions; in a moment of euphoria, incoming Public Works Minister Jatin Chakraborty had the top of the Shaheed Minar monument painted red. Salaries of civil servants took up some 80 per cent of the state budget; effectively, public-sector employees came to constitute an urban pillar of electoral support for the Left Front, to complement its strongholds in the *panchayats*. But whereas the latter were relatively cheap, civil-service emoluments were expensive to maintain, leaving little in reserve for upgrading social services for the rest of the population.

In West Bengal's industrial heartlands, the CPM faced an uphill struggle to reverse the decades of Congress neglect. Before Partition, the united province had accounted for 30 per cent of India's manufacturing output. After 1947, West Bengal could no longer rely on the proximity of raw materials, factories and ports for its competitive advantage: the Nehru government systematically downgraded the state, restricting licenses and investment and imposing a 'freight equalization' tariff that raised transport costs to those of the inland regions. From the 1960s, a chronic shortage of power contributed to disinvestment and falling profitability.

⁹ For a critical overview see Ross Mallick, *Development policy of a Communist government: West Bengal since 1977*, Cambridge 1993.

Labour militancy—Bengal is the homeland of the *bandh*, a general strike that can last for days—no doubt contributed to capital flight, as always alleged, but by the late 70s had become largely defensive. Here, however, the CPM vote was largely assured.

Modest but measurable improvements in popular living standards; consolidation of a well-organized rural vote block and public-sector support in the cities; a buttressing alliance with the smaller Left Front parties; popular memories of Congress authoritarianism—clearly these are important elements in any explanation of why the CPM's 1977 victory in West Bengal, born out of the vote against the Emergency, did not dissipate at the next election, as happened in other states, but became anchored for the duration. Yet in themselves they were not sufficient to ensure the CPM's continuing predominance after the Congress vote recovered, as it did in the 1980s. It is often assumed outside of India that the Left Front won two-thirds of the vote in West Bengal in the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s, since it consistently won that proportion, or more, of the seats in the state assembly. In fact, from 1982 onwards the Congress and, later, Trinamool Congress percentage of the vote was roughly equal to, or even higher than, the CPM's (see Table 1). But, thanks to the vagaries of India's British-built first-past-the-post electoral system, the Congress vote yielded between a half and a quarter of the seats the CPM obtained, and sometimes even less.

TABLE 1. *West Bengal Assembly Elections, 1982–2006: Votes and Seat Yields*

	1982		1987		1991		1996		2001		2006	
	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats
CPM	38	174	39	187	37	189	38	157	37	143	37	176
INC	36	49	42	40	35	43	39	43	8	26	15	21
TMC									31	60	27	30
AIFB	6	28	6	26	6	29	5	21	6	25	6	23
RSP	4	19	4	18	3	18	4	18	3	17	4	20

Total seats in State Assembly: 294

Source: Election Commission of India.

In other words—and astonishingly, considering its appalling record—Congress maintained a solid level of voter support in West Bengal. But its voters were generally either highly concentrated in a small number of constituencies, mostly in the city of Calcutta itself or holdouts in the North, or else dispersed through many constituencies but in slightly smaller numbers than CPM supporters, and so counted for nothing in the Indian ‘winner takes all’ electoral process. Under a more representative system the CPM would have faced the stimulus of serious political competition and perhaps potentially restorative terms out of office, as in Kerala; for there is no doubt that the absence of opposition had a deleterious effect on the culture of Writers’ Building, the state’s central administration. And while the CPM sustained the 35 per cent of the vote it had won in 1977, the reforms it implemented over successive decades in office never increased this beyond a few percentage points.

Limitations and stasis

How should the Left Front’s first two decades be assessed? The CPM correctly points to severe structural limitations facing the party’s reform efforts in West Bengal—first and foremost, the vindictiveness of the Centre. As opponents of Congress, the CPM faced an uphill battle against Union discrimination and missed out on the patronage that other Congress-run states enjoyed. Indira Gandhi’s government turned down an application to build an electronics complex in a satellite town of Calcutta, on grounds of ‘security’. The Bakreshwar Thermal Power project and Haldia petrochemicals development faced decade-long delays. The Centre imposed stiff restrictions on borrowing, followed by punitive austerity measures in the late 80s as the Rajiv Gandhi government started to put an end to Indian developmentalism. In addition, West Bengal was experiencing rapid population growth, in what was already the most densely inhabited state of the Union. Capital flight was a vital problem. As noted, however, labour militancy had become largely defensive: real wages in manufacturing have been on the decline since the mid 80s, as the sector’s share in GSDP dropped, and are now lower than in Gujarat and Maharashtra, the most industrialized states. Under the Left Front, more work-days were lost due to lockouts than to strikes.

Yet arguably, this arrested development had its counterpart in the internal culture of the CPM itself. Its unreconstructed Stalinism was reinforced by native customs of veneration and paternalism; adherence to rigid

party norms effectively quashed all internal debate. Insiders were given priority for promotion in the civil service, universities, government hospitals, etc. Not that cronyism did not exist under Congress, of course; but the bar should be higher for a party of the left. Ultimately this tendency in the Left Front administration was demoralizing, and it depleted standards. A sectarian attitude towards the non-party intelligentsia was part of this 'politicization' or tribalism: you were either for or against the CPM (this had homologues in the informal sector and in protection rackets on the street). Despite having some of India's brightest thinkers and artists among their sympathizers, the CPM had left behind the CPI's rich intellectual heritage. Calcutta is not the cultural hub it once was: political ossification, and the lure of better funding, has channelled a gradual brain drain of Bengali scholars and publishers to Delhi.¹⁰ The West Bengal party's main form of outreach is its daily Bengali newspaper, *Ganashakti*, which has a weekday circulation of 230,000 and can be read from billboards around Calcutta. Cocooned by an anti-intellectualism and increasing parochialism, the Bengali CPM has maintained an ecumenical attitude to the various dogmas of its Left Front allies, on the one hand, and stony silence towards critical analyses of its development policies from outside its ranks, on the other. Its murderous hostility towards Naxalism has also had a deeply corrosive effect.

The CPM's lack of political will or imagination to tackle education and social services for the unprivileged has been attributed to the pervasive social conservatism and patriarchy of the party's *bhadralok*—'gentleman'—leadership.¹¹ The concerns of the Latin American left with popular literacy projects are alien to it. From the early 90s, West Bengal was counted an educationally backward state at the primary level, with one of the worst enrolment rates; twenty years earlier it had been amongst the top few. Girls' primary-school enrolment dropped from 43 per cent in 1986 to 40.5 per cent a decade later. To make matters worse, the Left Front removed English instruction from the state curriculum, supposedly in the name of encouraging basic Bengali literacy, creating an unbridgeable chasm between government and private schools. A generation became ill-equipped for training in science and technology, or

¹⁰ From Delhi, the national CPM runs an English-language publishing house, LeftWord Books, and a theoretical quarterly, *The Marxist*; but genuine debate, rather than a party line, is hard to find.

¹¹ The high castes: Brahmins, Kayasthas and Vaidyas; ex-gentry who retain an aversion to manual labour, commerce and the poor.

the communications industry that swept Bangalore and Hyderabad, but bypassed Calcutta (itself now renamed Kolkata). In stark contrast, the CPM in Kerala mobilized volunteers in a highly successful mass-literacy campaign during the same period; high female literacy in particular has enabled a decline in infant mortality and fertility rates. West Bengal's health budget also fell below the Indian average, as a percentage of total expenditure, placing it near the bottom of the top ten large states.¹²

With so much of the state budget given over to police and civil-service salaries, little remained for the improvement of public services. Road construction, water supply, social housing and electrification failed to keep up with the growing population's needs. Diminishing living standards—overcrowding, poor sanitation—which were also the result of deindustrialization and migration, served to undermine Left Front support in Calcutta and contributed to Congress's share of disgruntled middle-class voters there. Petty extortion—'collecting for the party'—became common; larger-scale rackets run by CPM goons were assured impunity, thanks to police collusion. Resentments were exacerbated by the CPM policy of excluding non-party people from public-sector jobs, promotions, social services, etc, both in the cities, where Congress generally outpolled the CPM, and in the countryside, where it retained substantial support among the better-off farmers.¹³

Rural gains also started to plateau—signs that the wider economic benefits of the Green Revolution and land reforms had been exhausted. By the start of the 1990s, landlessness had begun to rise and poverty reduction to falter, although at 28 per cent the rural poverty head-count was a vast improvement on the all-India figure of 43 per cent in 1992. Per capita holdings had become smaller with population growth, but also more equalized, although this was mostly the result of market sales or household subdivisions, rather than the relatively smaller-scale land redistribution.¹⁴ As production became increasingly commodified,

¹² For a systematic comparison of the CPM's records in West Bengal and Kerala, see below: Achin Vanaik, 'Left Strategy in India', *NLR* 70, July–August 2011. I would like to express my gratitude to Achin Vanaik for his perceptive comments on this piece.

¹³ I am grateful for Pranab Bardhan's insights on these points. See also Bardhan, 'The Avoidable Tragedy of the Left in India–II', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 11 June 2011.

¹⁴ Households with between 0 and 2.5 acres rose from 28 per cent in 1980 to 43 per cent by 1995: West Bengal Agricultural Census.

cultivators were offered little protection from a commercial elite based around the rice mills, who lived off the wide margins between paddy and rice prices. With rising costs for fertilizers, pesticides and loans—thus diminishing returns—marginal and small farmers were left prone to debt and losing land. The large-scale mill owners and traders had no particular interests in landlordism, so did not present an obstacle to redistribution. Their power was in fact strengthened by the CPM, which relied on them to get around petty middlemen to reduce the costs of procuring rice for India's byzantine Public Distribution System. With deregulation in the early 90s, the position of the rice mills was further assured as they were allowed to shed traditional pedal-operated huskers, and the millions of women working them, for electrical ones.¹⁵

The Left Front has done little specifically to address social inequalities based on caste, creed or ethnicity, beyond token quotas for government posts; although the majority of land-reform beneficiaries have been the so-called Scheduled Castes and Tribes, as well as Muslims, offered more security here than in some parts of India. Yet their position remains precarious.¹⁶ On the extreme margins of Bengali society with little upward mobility, *adivasis* fare the worst. A majority are under the age of fifteen and suffer from chronic malnutrition. The main concentration of the state's tribal population lives in West Midnapore, on the edge of Orissa and Jharkhand; Santhals comprise the largest group. The effects of inadequate healthcare and education are acute for minoritized groups—who, categorized together, constitute the majority in West Bengal. Nearly two thirds of Muslims are illiterate; amongst Scheduled Tribes, female literacy is virtually nil, with knock-on effects for child health and mortality. The Left Front organizes annual commemorations of the victims of

¹⁵ Barbara Harriss-White, *Rural Commercial Capital: Agricultural Markets in West Bengal*, Delhi 2007.

¹⁶ In the late 1960s, vulnerable Scheduled Caste Hindus still in East Bengal sought asylum from communal violence: many communities were broken up by the Central government and sent to other states where they did not speak the language; they eventually tried to make their way back to West Bengal. A tragic instance occurred when one such group was driven out as intruders from their encampment in the Dandakaranya forest, in what is now Chhattisgarh, by the local *adivasis*. About 30,000 Scheduled Caste refugees journeyed to the mangrove forest of the Sundarbans in the late 70s. The Left Front government forbade the settlement, on the grounds of preserving an ecological reserve, and launched a police offensive that culminated in the deaths of 236 people in the newly founded village of Marichjhapi. Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58, no. 1, Feb 1999.

Ayodhya on the Maidan in Calcutta, but it has never raised a campaign for desegregation in West Bengal, where Muslims are barely represented in cultural and civic life. The state's so-called Scheduled and Backward groups do not have to contend with pogroms, as elsewhere in India, but the Left Front's inertia on inequality and the lack of public services has left these populations particularly open to the appeal of Maoism or of militant Islamism. In turn the state started to escalate its violence, through routine police harassment, while retreating still further from the provision of social goods.

A post-communist model?

At an impasse after their fourth successive victory in 1991, the ageing CPM leadership now had to contend with two traumatic outcomes: the end of Communism in the Soviet Union and of developmentalism in India, as Manmohan Singh's Finance Ministry launched the country towards economic liberalization. The CPM was a vocal critic of Singh's policies in the Lok Sabha; but within three years its leaders in West Bengal were following the same course. Basu announced the first public-private partnerships in 1994. The CPM switched to parroting the Central government, reinventing West Bengal as an investment-friendly gateway to Southeast Asia and advertising the state's non-unionized manufacturing sector as the largest—and one of the cheapest—in India.¹⁷ The headline figures were impressive: between 1996 and 2003, West Bengal attracted over \$1.3 billion in foreign direct investment and the highest rate of domestic investment next to Gujarat. GSDP grew on average by 8 per cent a year, while over a tenth of total GSDP was comprised of exports, not least steel to China and the East Asian Tigers: \$2.8 billion in 2001.

But the take-off in manufacturing did nothing to regenerate West Bengal's industrial heartlands, where layoffs and retrenchments only increased. The model the Left Front was pursuing was that of the 'enclave economy': a small high-productivity sector, with bespoke access to capital, transport, electricity and water, surrounded by the untouched mass of the agricultural workforce and the traditional economy.¹⁸ Rather than bring industry back to where it—and militancy—had been historically

¹⁷ West Bengal also has a higher percentage of people in lower—and higher—income brackets than the national average.

¹⁸ For the 'enclave economy', see Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy: 1947–2004*, 2nd ed., Delhi 2005, ch. 14.

located, the CPM leadership aimed to build Special Economic Zones in greenfield locations. On the advice of American consultants, it has pursued agrarian restructuring in line with WTO agreements, establishing Agri-Export Zones to process fruit and potatoes, with the big mills and contractors primed to service them. Prominent investors included snack-maker Frito-Lay. Along with bypassing trade-union rights, agro-businesses enjoyed monopolies over selling inputs; contracts allowed them to predetermine the quantity and quality of the produce, and to ditch farmers with cash crops. Since AEZs are classified as industrial sites, regular land ceilings did not apply. The price was increasing hardship for the mass base that CPM leaders had long been able to take for granted: small farmers and manufacturing workers.

The turn to Beijing-style market reforms overlapped with a generational transition in the CPM leadership. The 86-year-old Jyoti Basu stepped down as Chief Minister to hand over the reins to his protégé Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in 2000, in preparation for the state election the following year. The passage of power had been in the making for almost a decade. There had long been rumours that Basu's high-living businessman son, Chandan, was profiting from his family connections and from tax evasion. In 1993 Bhattacharjee had made the gesture of resigning from the state Cabinet in protest at corruption in the administration and party, without incurring any censure; it seemed then that the leadership valued him for his clean public image as a crusader. The previous generation—Basu, Dasgupta, Konar—had been labour organizers, working underground, often enduring hardship and gaol. Bhattacharjee and Biman Bose, the new West Bengal party secretary and Left Front chair, both born in Calcutta in the early 1940s, had spent most of their adult lives in the corridors of Writers' Building. Bhattacharjee also represented the 'moderate', 'modernizing' face of the CPM: cosmopolitan, third way. He had initially entered the state Cabinet as Culture Minister—he was a playwright and translator, on the side—but later added responsibility for the police to his portfolio. The hope was that he would give the party a fresh look, to see off a dangerous new contender.

Nemesis

For just as the Left Front's new course was gathering speed, seemingly with unbreakable electoral support, a nemesis emerged in the shape of the rogue Congress politician Mamata Banerjee. Born in 1955 in Calcutta

to a modest middle-class Brahmin family, Mamata had accompanied her father to Congress rallies as a child. She rose through the ranks of the party's student(-vigilante) wing, the Chhatra Parishad, during the Emergency—after gaining notoriety for blocking JP Narayan's car in Calcutta and dancing on the bonnet. In 1984 she took one of the CPM's safest Lok Sabha seats in the Calcutta constituency of Jadavpur, and in 1991 entered Narasimha Rao's cabinet. In terms of personality, she can run the gamut from agony aunt to firebrand. Though she leads a spartan life, Mamata's performance in the political arena is nothing short of gladiatorial—theatrics include practically throttling another MP in front of the Lok Sabha and threatening to hang herself by a noose made from her shawl at a rally.

Though her temperament is volatile, making her an unusual figure in latter-day Congress politics, the basic reason for her split with Congress in the mid-90s is that she has been staunchly anti-Communist throughout her career, since her days under Rajiv, and especially Sanjay, Gandhi. The battle against the CPM had turned personal in 1990 when their cadre beat her so badly she was hospitalized for three months with a fractured skull. She was further galvanized against the Left Front in 1993, when police shot and killed 13 people at a demonstration she held in front of Writers' Building. When Congress, mired in corruption scandals, entered into talks with the CPM in 1996 about forming a federal coalition to keep out the BJP, with Jyoti Basu's name floated as a possible United Front government Prime Minister, Mamata rebelled, vehemently denouncing expedient national alliances that would effectively neuter Congress's fight to unseat the CPM in West Bengal. Her criticism of Bengali Congress politicians whose national ambitions led them to spurn the interests of the grassroots, or *trinamool*, precipitated the final split.

Leading a revolt of disaffected Bengali Congress activists in late 1997, Mamata launched the Trinamool Congress as her own vehicle. Already in the mid 90s she had started to reach out beyond Congress's traditional supporters, for example denouncing the CPM's forcible clearances of street hawkers in Calcutta in the name of urban regeneration. Meanwhile sweatshops were proliferating alongside rising unemployment in the new liberalized era and the CPM-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions was clamping down on independent actions in order to 'protect industry'. For the 1998 Lok Sabha election in West Bengal, Mamata entered into a seat-sharing arrangement with the BJP, who most

likely provided seed money for her campaign. It was a compromising alliance: to keep some semblance of being a champion of the underdog she had to profess that she would not abide communalism. But the 1998 contest proved to be a shot across the CPM's bow, indicating a rising tide of cynicism and anti-incumbent sentiment among the precarious urban sector. Although the CPM's share of the state vote did not slip below 34 per cent, there was a strong swing in favour of the TMC and BJP in the industrial suburbs of Calcutta. In Dum Dum, which the CPM had only lost once since 1952, the party was served some bitter medicine: the vote fell by 10 per cent and the seat went to the BJP. The following year the TMC became a partner in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, launching Mamata onto the national scene.

In West Bengal's 2001 state-assembly election, the TMC took 31 per cent of the vote and 60 seats, nearly wiping out the official Congress party which was reduced to 7 per cent, even though—thanks once again to the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system—this cashed out as 26 seats. The CPM, with Bhattacharjee as the new Chief Minister, took 37 per cent of the vote and 143 seats. The electoral edifice constructed by Basu and Dasgupta—*panchayat* patronage in the countryside, bureaucratic prebends and union kickbacks in the cities, vote blocks of Left Front junior partners in the hill regions—was apparently still intact. Alimuddin Street's complacency about its ability to survive any eventuality was only strengthened in the 2006 state elections when the TMC, now in an alliance with the BJP, saw its vote fall to 26 per cent while its seats were halved to 30. Mamata's image was tarnished by having worked with the BJP after the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat. She was attacked as politically erratic for having walked out of the NDA Cabinet, then allied with Congress, only to fall out with it again.

Complacency and crisis

Seemingly invincible, Bhattacharjee and his Minister for Industry, Nirupam Sen, gave free rein to the party's *goonda* element to speed their business-development plans through coercive slum clearances and land acquisitions. Distress sales by small farmers in Calcutta's neighbouring districts had facilitated the new IT parks, shopping malls and real-estate developments. Grievances had little traction, since a viable opposition to the government had failed to materialize. Political parties in India have long had their own affiliated unions and social groups, but also their

own armed elements. Violence and corruption is not more prevalent in West Bengal's political culture than in the rest of the country, but it has some peculiar expressions. At the party's apex elected politicians have engaged in very little graft: the Chief Minister lived in a government tenement while modest, backwater party leaders lived in plush villas. Local fiefdoms would increasingly become flashpoints as a layer that had benefited commercially from political connections fought off those who got in the way of new opportunities.

The auto giant, Tata Motors, had been lured to West Bengal with a sweetener of \$200 million to build a plant for its new 'affordable car'. In 2006, a barrier was erected around the proposed site—997 acres of prime agricultural land at Singur, in Hooghly district—although there had been no consultation with the 20,000 people about to be displaced. The TMC turned local discontent in what happened to be one of their constituencies into a state-wide protest. That December Mamata went on hunger strike in Calcutta amidst a media circus. Tensions were heightened when Tapasi Malick, a prominent teenage protestor, was murdered by a CPM party worker and the local CPM committee head, with construction interests in the project, and her burning remains were discovered in the cordoned-off area.

On the heels of the protests at Singur in December 2006, the CPM's Lakshman Seth¹⁹ unveiled plans to survey Nandigram for a 14,500 acre SEZ to be developed jointly by the state and an Indonesian conglomerate near the port city of Haldia, the new principal hub of chemical and petrochemical industries. Distrustful of how they would be treated, villagers set upon the local *panchayat* office, where they clashed with police, then built a blockade. The proposed site was home to about 65,000 people, predominantly Muslim and low-caste agriculturalists and fishers. Maintaining the siege, the TMC spearheaded a coalition. It was Left Front cadres rebelling now, a significant section leaving to join the rival party. Not even a week after the Tata contract was signed in March 2007, the state made a huge show of force by deploying 4,000 armed police, who were then met by a crowd of 20,000. Fourteen people were shot dead and over a hundred severely maimed, most likely by the 500 CPM cadre embedded in the operation.

¹⁹ Then a CPM MP and Chair of the Haldia Development Authority, who had risen to prominence as a highly effective trade-union agitator.

In contrast to Left Front intransigence on Singur, the government was forced to put Nandigram plans on hold after CPI, RSP and AIFB leaders threatened to walk out of the Cabinet. By then the battle was no longer about industrial policy but territorial control. More lives were lost in partisan clashes and exchanges of fire that erupted in the months following the massacre. All CPM offices in the area were destroyed; houses and shops of members and supporters were ransacked or torched. The local CPM planned an operation to recapture the area, allegedly with the consent of senior party leaders. Several hundred armed cadres stormed the area in November. Bhattacharjee publicly stated that the protesters had been ‘paid back in the same coin’. Though he was forced to retract the comment, he refused to offer an unequivocal apology.²⁰ The government’s new strategy was to move SEZ construction, like a hot potato, to less fertile regions such as West Midnapore and Purulia—far away from TMC bases near Calcutta.

In November 2008 a landmine blast hit the Chief Minister’s convoy in West Midnapore, as it was returning from the proposed site for a Jindal Steel plant in Salboni. Without evidence or warrant, the police launched reprisals against people in neighbouring Lalgarh. Villagers again barricaded themselves in. News spread from village to village by *dhamsa madal*, the traditional Santhal drum, and mobile phone. Solidarity from surrounding *adivasi* villages brought the movement to Bankura and Purulia districts. Afraid of a repeat of Nandigram, the government withdrew the police. As with Nandigram, a turf battle ensued over several months. Meanwhile the CPI (Maoist)—founded out of a convergence of modern-day Naxalite groupings, hitherto without a significant presence in the state—lent their support and began to recruit in the region. Organizers from neighbouring Jharkand and Andhra Pradesh trained local youth to defend their own earlier attempts at self-government, which bypassed party and traditional hierarchies. Protestors destroyed the CPM’s office and the newly built villa of Anuj Pandey, the local party head, and his brother, a wealthy contractor and dealer in agricultural supplies. The Maoists proclaimed the area a ‘liberated zone’. Trying to supplant the state, they extorted ‘taxes’ from vestiges of government administration and fought off competitors. Bhattacharjee called in joint state and Central

²⁰ He then further alienated intellectuals by allowing Islamist rioters to expel Bangladeshi novelist Taslima Nasrin from Calcutta, where she had been in exile after a *fatwa* against her. Among the crowd were protestors for the Muslim victims in Nandigram.

security forces, who cordoned off the region as thousands fled their homes. Subsequently the TMC, Maoists and other independent activists shared platforms in Lalgarh against government repression.

Another left

These movements of rural unrest can draw comparison to similar scenes in China, but in India the mix of extreme deprivation with political freedoms—however ensnared in electoral malpractice and an obstructive legal system—has more combustible results. Maoists have launched spectacular attacks on police installations in West Bengal and dominate the arid western plateau in the districts of Purulia, Bankura and Midnapore, dubbed *Jungle Mahal*.²¹ But the area is a small corner of the Tribal Belt of India where Maoism is spreading. The most affected states have isolated *adivasi* populations in virgin forest, usually on top of mineral deposits lately eyed for extraction. What sets West Bengal apart is that an early state campaign—violent repression, followed by incentives of agrarian reform—had induced peasants to put down their weapons for decades. Latter-day Maoists there also have more contact with mainstream politics, in dialogue with other protestors and a major party. They even supported an independent candidate, jailed activist Chhatradhar Mahato, in the 2011 state election; whereas in the North—from where Naxalism takes its name—Gorkha and Rajbanshi separatists, with their own armed contingents, came to prominence in the 80s and 90s.

Why did the CPM careen so recklessly into the disasters of Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh? After the 2006 state election, they took for granted a divided and weak opposition. Earlier drives to displace poor people from their homes, for the sake of ‘development’, had not received widespread attention; but in a new media environment, mobile or online images could send shockwaves. This obliviousness to public opinion is the outgrowth of a lack of political debate within the party. If the CPM had been more democratic at the grassroots, then the TMC could not have swollen up so rapidly with its defectors. Most Indian parties are run as family businesses, of course, so the CPM’s unanimism is not an anomaly overall, even if its specifically Stalinist discipline provides a harder shell and blinder self-assurance in pursuing policies that the State Committee has decided. The party did eventually make concessions—they distributed

²¹ The Bengali word *jungle* here means forest or bush, and invokes the uncivilized.

10,000 acres in regions neighbouring the unrest and pledged an end to forcible acquisitions—but the damage had been done.

The other key factor is the CPM's relation to mass movements outside its purview. The CPM's original baptism of fire in office was its effort to crush Naxalism, under the 60s United Front. Thus its formative experience was not mobilization, but repression, of a rural movement; this generated a pride in its toughness against 'ultra-left adventurism' that became a part of its identity. But in contrast to forty years ago, the CPM cadre played a bigger role in recent clashes than state forces, which were almost auxiliary; in the absence of any proper investigation, it is not clear what control the state leadership had over local members. At stake was not just the maintenance of 'law and order'. As their commander Lakshman Seth put it to an interviewer in early 2008: the TMC's political game plan is 'to capture our ground. Our political field. Their intention is to oust our CPM party from Nandigram. If this model had succeeded they could have used this model elsewhere.'²² Presumably his concerns lay with the TMC union making inroads into the factories of Haldia.

Beginning of the end

The TMC went on to sweeping victories throughout the Singur and Nandigram districts in the *panchayat* elections in May 2008—with their new slogan '*Ma, Mati, Manush*': Mother, Land, Humanity. In the Lok Sabha elections of 2009 it extended its reach to the wider Ganges delta: the TMC won 19 of 42 seats, while the CPM was reduced to 9 and, for the first time in decades, failed to win a plurality of the vote. The writing was on the wall for the critical state-assembly election in May 2011. Astoundingly, in January 2011 CPM cadre were involved in killing several people in nearby Netai. The TMC set up relief camps, built support and won the seat.

In the run-up to May 2011, Bhattacharjee was conspicuous by his absence on the campaign trail, while Mamata staged large rallies across the state on the platform of *poriborton*—change. The CPM pledged to preserve the stability of the state, and improve its governance and efficiency. For the most part their election drive was practical: the CPM concentrated on canvassing swing-voters in the southeast, and fielded a slate that was

²² V. K. Shashikumar, 'Operation Nandigram: The Inside Story', *Indian Defence Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2008.

a quarter Muslim and mostly young, first-time candidates. A 'rectification drive' had also been underway, announced at the same time as the rampage in West Midnapore: to root out corruption, 24,000 members had been removed over the last year.²³ One of the issues the CPM did raise was increasing quotas for Muslims and the so-called Other Backward Classes in government jobs. The other, in plain speech and circumlocutions, was that taking land from farmers was just the reality of any development in the state; in the future they would not be so 'high-handed'. In short, the party offered nothing to the voters they were trying to woo. Mamata was attacked by the CPM from the right, as a crypto-Maoist. Her rebuttal was that Maoism arises from poverty. Her Bengali manifesto pledged infrastructure and welfare to Jungle Mahal, as well as the Sundarbans and North. The English-language version proposed to bring about a second Green Revolution, industrial revival and tourism. She also had the backing of imams in her campaign against the state's oppression and marginalization of Muslims.

The result, when it came, was no surprise. The TMC received 39 per cent of the vote and 184 seats; its coalition with Congress raised this to 48 per cent of votes and 227 out of the state assembly's 294 seats. The CPM took just 30 per cent of the vote and 40 seats; the Left Front as a whole got 41 per cent of the vote and 62 seats—half of them seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes and Castes. The AIFB and RSP lost most of their existing seats except for a few in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri respectively, where their main opponents were the TMC-backed Gorkha nationalists. Voter turnout across the state was 85 per cent—many going to the polls for the first time, having never known any other government nor the traumas of the past. Among voters under 25, the TMC led the CPM by 55 to 37 per cent. Of the outgoing Left Front cabinet, including the Chief Minister, 26 of 34 lost their constituencies, a clear dismissal of the CPM leadership. The majority of TMC votes were cast in the cities—Calcutta, Hoogly and Howrah—and in the largely Muslim districts of North and South 24 Parganas. Rural, Bengali-speaking Muslims in general had been supporters of the Left Front, until the fight-back waged by people much like them in Singur and Nandigram. Congress took Murshidabad,²⁴ where the majority is Muslim and support for the party had traditionally come from Urdu-speaking elites. The CPM's vote came largely from Bardhaman and North/South 24 Parganas. The party did

²³ Barun Ghosh, '1000 Face CPM Axe', *Calcutta Telegraph*, 16 January 2011.

²⁴ Seat of the Nawabs who ruled Bengal during the Mughal period.

not win any seats in the major cities—not Asansol nor Durgapur, let alone greater Calcutta, where it took only one seat out of 66. A few vestiges remain in the former stronghold districts of Bardhaman, Bankura and West Midnapore. The TMC's success was not purely down to public engagements; in Bardhaman they recruited ex-CPM muscle to attack party offices and supporters.²⁵

Balance sheet

What have been the social and economic outcomes of the CPM's 34 years in office? West Bengal's ranking is around the Indian average on most indicators (see Table 2). The gap between rural and urban wealth has increased. Landlessness has been on the rise throughout the CPM's tenure: just under 40 per cent of the rural population in 1987, rising to half in 2000, when it was 41 per cent for India as a whole. According to census data, cultivators have become a minority of the rural workforce. Some of this shift is due to rural diversification, while many trek to urban centres to find work, often on the streets. Average economic growth has slowed compared to the 90s, when West Bengal was next only to Karnataka. But while its total GSDP is still one of the highest, on per capita GSDP it lies in around 6th place, between Punjab and Karnataka. West Bengal's poverty rate has seen little improvement since the 90s and its national HDI standing has basically remained static since the early years of the Left Front regime: from seventh place amongst major Indian states in 1981 to eighth. In health, new independent rural ambulances and clinics have brought some improvement. Infant mortality is one of the lowest in India, and the maternal mortality rate has fallen. On literacy West Bengal fares better than Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Punjab, though the dropout rate is still shocking.

Following the election results, Indian and Western media cast the CPM's defeat in gleeful Cold War terms—voters had shed the yoke of Marxism and over three decades of decline. What Mamata's programme is, not even her spokespeople can say. In her favour, one of the biggest state deficits in India has been resolved with an influx of Central funds, provided by the Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee—elder statesman and head of the Bengali Congress, once Indira Gandhi's right-hand man. Mamata Banerjee's self-propelled cult of personality—bringing to mind

²⁵ Smita Gupta, 'Bardhaman: Left under siege', *The Hindu*, 12 April 2011.

TABLE 2. *West Bengal and All-India Development*

	West Bengal	All-India
GSDP growth (%), 2001–10	6.7	7.6
Population below poverty line (%), 2009–10	32.5	32.2
Maternal mortality (per 1,000), 2004–06	141	254
Infant mortality (per 1,000), 2009	33	50
Child malnutrition (%), 2005–06	37.6	40.4
Elementary-school dropouts (%), 2007–08	63.9	43
Literacy over age 7 (%), 2011	77.1	74

Source: Montek Singh Ahluwalia, 'Prospects and Policy Challenges in the Twelfth Plan', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 21 May 2011.

Uttar Pradesh's Mayawati—has been the catalyst for harnessing rural voters in key districts, which Congress has not been able to do over three decades despite retaining a large portion of the electorate. The reality is that the CPM was voted out from the left, a historic reversal from their ascent to power in 1977. Bhattacharjee and Bose now represent the rear-guard of the national party: the CPM's opposition to the passage of the SEZ Act in 2005 and the Indo-US Nuclear Deal in 2008 was directly contradicted by the regional party's practice in West Bengal.²⁶ At the same time, the Central Committee has kept the Bengali leadership in place. They are making the best of a bad situation—the popular vote had not completely evaporated. They maintain that their record is unblemished: in Biman Bose's wooden terms, their programme is to reconnect with the people and rectify the mistakes of their cadre.²⁷ Though CPM politicians have shown relative probity compared with the mephitic swamp of Congress, malversation and thuggery below cannot be tackled as a matter of etiquette.

It is possible that time in opposition could rejuvenate the CPM; but it seems unlikely. The more probable scenario is that CPM patronage

²⁶ There had been plans to build a nuclear plant in Haripur, on one of the world's most cyclone-prone coastlines, shelved after resistance from the local fishermen.

²⁷ See www.cpmwb.org.in.

networks will dry up by the time of the next state election in 2016, and they will suffer further losses. The party is entering the political wilderness divorced from internationalist and mass movements that could enable it to reorient its membership and replace its leadership. Amongst the base, sliding popularity has begun to have organizational repercussions: the Kisan Sabha lost nearly a million members in 2009 from 15,900,000 the year before.²⁸ Extra-parliamentary groups are subordinated to electoralism: trade and peasant unions, student and women's groups do not work across partisan lines to promote common interests. This leads to the absurdity of different unions in dispute with the same employer in pitched battles with one another. The CPM failed to innovate a relationship between social movements and political office. Instead, they rested on hollow victories that relied on gigantic disproportions between their actual share of votes and number of seats in the state assembly. Winning constituencies—rather than building more support and fighting for advancements—became an end in itself.

The other Left Front parties contributed to an optical illusion of mass support for the CPM, with coalition votes and seats often equated, though their role in government is subordinate. After years of electoral alliance, they have become more than ever restricted to their bailiwicks and no longer have a distinct political identity in the state as a whole. Yet in India's vertically integrated society, small parties can often survive the usually lethal impact of first-past-the-post politics. Post-election the AIFB and RSP have admonished the CPM leadership, but this raises the question of why they followed along. A long-discussed reunification of the CPI and its erstwhile offshoot seems closer in sight, the former accustomed to mainly being Congress's bolster in parliament, now the CPM's fate. If nothing can be salvaged from the rest of the Left Front, then a new generation will have to forge its own alliances amongst independent left parties, the non-party radicals in social movements and the far left in the Tribal belt.

²⁸ 'CPM Losing Base, Admits Kisan Sabha Leadership', *The Statesman*, 30 December 2010.