This is the published version

Lofgren, Hans 2011, India's parliamentary communism, Arena magazine, no. 112, pp. 32-35.

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India’s Parliamentary Communism

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Resistance and co-option in neo-liberalising India

The Soviet Union is long gone and communist parties elsewhere have mostly faded away. Communist parties have played no role recently in North Africa and the Middle East and were at best marginal in Latin America’s turn to the Left. But in India the parliamentary communist Left remains significant, and across large parts of central India revolutionary communists pursue armed struggle under the leadership of a ‘Maoist’ party.

From the early 1990s, India’s parliamentary communist Left gained influence in national politics and consolidated its strength in three states governed for long periods by communist-led coalitions—Kerala, West Bengal, and the small north-eastern state of Tripura. In 1996, Jayottu Basu, a leading figure in the largest of the Left parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), and then Chief Minister of West Bengal, was offered the prime ministership of India by the then majority coalition in New Delhi. But the CPM politburo balked at the prospect of accepting governmental responsibility in the absence of full control, a decision subsequently regretted by Basu and many CPM supporters. Communist prestige and influence in national politics peaked at this point. The Left regained national influence between 2004 and 2008, but more recently has suffered electoral defeats including winning only twenty-four seats (sixteen for the CPM) in the 2009 national Lok Sabha (lower house) elections, down from sixty-one seats in 2004.

The CPM’s commitment to Leninism, democratic centralism, and revolutionary transition, while de facto pursuing social democratic reforms, make for occasionally fraught relations with India’s social movements. Yet communism and Marxism remain powerful reference points for Indian intellectuals and popular movements to a greater extent than in any other parliamentary democracy. Extreme poverty, and the divide between rich and poor, made worse by India’s neo-liberal development trajectory, ensure that ideologies of resistance, including communism, will retain strong appeal. Where deprivation is worst, armed struggle against corporate predators and the state is widely seen as a justifiable response.

In elections in April–May this year, communist-dominated Left coalitions lost government in the important states of Kerala and West Bengal. In Kerala the Left fell short of a majority by 3 seats, gaining 45.13 per cent of the vote. It remains in a strong position to set the policy agenda and to return to government at the next election, in line with the Kerala pattern of Congress- and CPM-led fronts taking turn in office. In West Bengal the circumstances are much different. In this state of more than eighty million people, the Left Front, dominated by the CPM, was elected seven times in succession from 1977, a unique record in the history of parliamentary democracy. Defeat for the Left after thirty-four years, preceded by violent confrontations with populist, anti-communist forces, and hundreds of political killings, points to big changes and uncertain times in West Bengal.

India’s polity is one of incessant turmoil and colourful public squabbling, in the regions as well as in the national capital. In a federation of twenty-eight states (and seven union territories), the states have jurisdiction in many public policy areas, including agriculture and education. The financial resources and constitutional supremacy of the Centre, however, impose severe constraints on state governments. The Left consider states a kind of municipal government which can at best implement limited reforms in the interest of the poor and working people, but not build socialism. Unlike in Australia, the states in India are not constitutionally safeguarded and can be reorganised by the Union government, which has power to dismiss state governments through the imposition of so-called President’s Rule. But the line between national and state politics is blurred, with the states in some respects having gained in importance. None of the national parties can expect to form government on its own in New Delhi. The Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is each at the centre of complex and fractious multi-party coalitions. Most parties in these coalitions have a regional base, reflecting the ethnic, social, cultural and political conditions of particular states. It is the concentrated strength of the Left in Kerala and West Bengal which has enabled the CPM to momentarily exercise influence in New Delhi.

The cultural, political and economic differences between the states have become more accentuated since India in the
early 1990s embarked on a neo-liberal transformation. High growth rate conceals an uneven process of development and growing inequalities. There is stagnation in much of the agricultural sector, continued weak employment generation, rapid urbanisation, with growth concentrated to the services sector rather than manufacturing. Large-scale capitalist agriculture and modern infrastructure have developed in states such as Punjab and Gujarat while extreme poverty and exploitation in the states of central India sustain the Maoist armed struggle. Yet parliamentary democracy is well entrenched; lower castes and poorer sections of society generally participate strongly in democratic politics. But the substance and meaning of democracy differ across states and regions. Corruption, clientelism, caste and communal violence, and a weak civil society are predominant in many states and regions. Where the Left has held state government, particularly in Kerala, democracy has gained more substance in terms of genuine local government, better education and health services, a more vibrant civil society, and generally better protection for workers and peasants than in other states. The highest electoral participation rates are also recorded in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, suggesting that the Left has brought the vast majority of people into the democratic process.

Since 2004, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by Congress—which is presided over by Sonia Gandhi and her family—has formed government in New Delhi. Congress is a 'catch-all party' with no distinct ideology, supported by landed and capitalist classes across much of India, but also by Muslim and other minorities fearing BJP's 'communal' program of Hindutva ('Indianness'). Until 2008, the Left supported the UPA government in parliament, without joining the government. The CPM abandoned the UPA on the issue of a US–India agreement on nuclear co-operation and an increasingly close strategic relation with the United States. Whatever one's assessment of the CPM, the party's anti-imperialism is indisputable, and for that reason alone remains a major irritant to the US-oriented political elites in New Delhi. The United States also does not look favourably at the CPM and the Indian parliamentary Left. Recent WikiLeaks documents showed US diplomats relishing the anticipated end of the Left Front government in West Bengal, advocating that the US government cultivate relations with the anti-communist opposition (now government) and its autocratic leader, Mamata Banerjee.

In Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, the power of the CPM is partly explained by the party giving expression to regional cultural and social aspirations against Congress and New Delhi. In this perspective, its orthodox Marxism–Leninism appears somewhat anomalous. The party's ideology also appears not to capture what many observers and left critics characterise as its social democratic orientation. A leading analyst argued long ago that the CPM 'is communist in name only and is essentially social-democratic in its ideology, social programme, and policies'.

The characterisation of Indian parliamentary communism as social democracy should not necessarily be understood as pejorative. Enhanced literacy and health, democratic local government, land reform (which brought an end to feudal exploitation), and a secularist stance against communal (inter-religious) and caste violence are surely significant achievements. The Left also, at the national level at least, strongly opposes neo-liberal de-regulation. The CPM in West Bengal from 1977 instigated a major land reform program, pioneered effective and democratic local government, and brought peace and stability to a state historically racked by feudal oppression and political violence. In every election since 1977, the Left Front in West Bengal has gained no less than 40 per cent of the vote at any time. Its record is even more convincing in Kerala, which is often showcased for remarkably good social policy and educational and democratic achievements. While the Left cannot take sole credit, the CPM in Kerala, growing out of powerful social and class movements, has made a key contribution to the success of social and economic reform in this part of India.

But Kerala, and more starkly West Bengal, also demonstrate the limits of social democracy in what Sandman, Edelman et al. describe as the 'global periphery'. In Kerala, good social policy has been implemented in the absence of a strong economic base. There is high unemployment and little industry, and millions of people from Kerala have been forced to go overseas for work, particularly to the Gulf countries. Their remittances sustain a high level of consumption (by Indian standards) by a large minority of Kerala households. Common to both Kerala and West Bengal is that support for the CPM is strongest among the peasantry, liberated from feudal exploitation through reforms instigated by the Left. Land and local government reforms have transformed rural life and given dignity and political power to previously marginalised rural populations. But giving land to the tillers does not ultimately resolve the conundrum of low productivity and poverty, and all the social and economic distortions generated by capitalism. Socialism

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has a historically mixed and in part dreadful record of addressing this dilemma. In the Soviet Union agriculture was collectivised through coercion from the late 1920s; in the 1950s China unsuccessfully sought to take a Great Leap Forward through people's communes. As emphasised, state governments in India lack the power of national states, but even so the Left in Kerala, and particularly West Bengal, has proven ineffective and lacking in imagination in addressing the deep-seated problems of agriculture and economic development. In West Bengal, growing rural prosperity in the first decades of Left Front government turned in the 1990s to an economic and social crisis, and ultimately a dead end in overall development. Progressively smaller land holdings caused a decline of agricultural growth, and the growth of population, and of educated young people in the villages, a crisis of employment. Big business had largely abandoned West Bengal after the 1977 election of the Left Front government and the state acquired a reputation as an economic backwater.

Following New Delhi’s turn to economic liberalisation from 1991, the Left Front in West Bengal abandoned the public sector as its principal focus for industrialisation. The new direction was formalised in an industrial policy in 1994, aimed at attracting capitalist investments by domestic and foreign big business, in competition with other states. But results were meagre in terms of investments and new jobs, notwithstanding claims that Kolkata was emerging as an important information technology centre. From 2006, compromises with the neo-liberal development model opened up a serious rift between the CPM and sections of its social base and many of its intellectual supporters. The Left Front had just won a big election victory in that year—the CPM alone won 234 of 294 seats in the state Assembly. But violent events in the rural areas of Singur and Nandigram triggered an anti-Left Front movement which peaked in 2011, when the CPM won only forty Assembly seats.

'Singur' and 'Nandigram' have become symbols throughout India for the failure of the CPM’s economic development strategy for West Bengal. Of course other state governments pursue similar policies on a larger scale and more viciously, but the Left is held to different standards. Singur was the site chosen by the Tata conglomerate, on the invitation of the West Bengal government, for the construction of a manufacturing plant for the new Nano car. The government endorsed this choice without consultation with affected peasants and the local government, and ferocious local opposition followed. After historically instigating land reform, the Left was now seen as taking fertile land from poor peasants without consultation and adequate compensation. The drive for industrialization took an even worse turn in 2007, after the appropriation of land at Nandigram for an Indonesian company to construct a chemical hub. In March that year, fourteen unarmed protesting villagers in Nandigram were shot dead by police. The anti-government and anti-CPM movement now escalated into open revolt by peasants supported by armed Maoists and the Trinamool Congress, the anti-communist opposition.

Until Singur and Nandigram, opposition to the Left Front had been fragmented and ineffective; now it gained powerful momentum. Trinamool, using left populist rhetoric, was able to build an anti-CPM movement which defeated the Left in both the national elections in 2009 and in the recent Assembly elections, where Trinamool alone won 184 out of 294 Assembly seats. There was massive political violence in rural areas in the years leading up to this election—hundreds of local CPM leaders and activists were killed by Maoists and Trinamool thugs. In turn, the CPM was accused of operating armed squads at times using lethal force. In Netai village of Lalgarh district, nine villagers were killed on 7 Jan 2011 by armed CPM activists. Immediately following the election, the CPM reported ‘widespread attacks on ... the Left Front in different parts of West Bengal’ and the murder of at least two local CPM leaders.

Academic analysts and leftist commentators have generally credited the CPM with providing disciplined leadership for a broad-based movement for social, economic and political reform in West Bengal from 1977. More recently, however, not only did its development strategy reach a dead end but its style of political leadership has been attacked ferociously from all quarters. By critics from the Left and the Right, the CPM was now depicted as corrupt, authoritarian Stalinists. Suggestive of the overwrought tone of the English-language media is the following: the people of West Bengal ‘for three decades lived through violence in all spheres of life. The
party-state not only controlled political power but ruled through the various quasi-judicial structures of unions, political henchmen in every service sector, local clubs, citizens’ committees, institutions of local self-governments in rural areas, social ostracism, fear of dispossession, suspension of civil rights and torture by the political police. More plausible analysts describe West Bengal under the Left Front as a ‘party-society’ in which identity and even survival in rural areas came to depend on party political affiliation.

In recent interviews undertaken in India, political scientists and Left sympathisers often expressed the view that it will be good for the CPM in West Bengal to go into opposition after thirty-four years. This will be an opportunity for review of policies and for shedding careerist and corrupt members attracted to the party when in power. Though much of the criticism of the CPM is absurdly overstated, some party activists undoubtedly engaged in corruption and undisciplined behaviour. The least corrupt states in India are the ones with a powerful Left but, again, communists are held to different standards. Moreover, opposition should enable reconsideration of its overall strategy. The party’s bewilderment in terms of the basic dilemma of development is given expression by the convenor of the CPM’s Research Unit:

What can be the contours of an agrarian strategy in West Bengal, which can consolidate the gains of land reforms and increase the productivity of small peasant-based agriculture? How can non-agricultural employment be generated in a productive and sustained manner? What possible role can the public sector play in the states’ industrialisation effort, given that the resource constraint confronting the state government is real and hard? To what extent can it address the problem of unemployment? Can planning play a more important role at the state level? Should private corporate investment in capital-intensive sectors be shunned completely? If not, on what terms can private investments be invited? What policies can the state government adopt to determine or influence the choice of techniques? What should be the role of small and medium enterprises in the industrialisation strategy? What can the state government do to promote innovations? Should industrialisation be based on the home market alone or should exports also be promoted? What is the best way to promote rural industrialisation? What provisions should a progressive land-use policy as well as land acquisition and rehabilitation policy comprise of? There is a need for the debate on the left in India to move beyond polemics into these substantive domains, for a clearer left will be created, the new man who will defy death and will be free from all thoughts of self interest. And with this death defying spirit he will go close to the enemy, snatch his rifle, avenge the martyrs and the peoples army will emerge.

Violence remains central to CPI(Maoist) strategy, including violence against the parliamentary Left, particularly in West Bengal. Extreme poverty and exploitation ensure that armed struggle will have continued appeal. There is every reason to pay attention to the Maoist movement but its violence should not be romanticised. Parliamentary democracy, notwithstanding conspicuous distortions and massive corruption, since independence in 1947 has gained deep roots in this huge country. The revolutionary route taken by peasant societies in twentieth century, such as China and Vietnam, is most unlikely to be repeated in India.

The CPM has been weakened by election defeats and strategic uncertainties but retains a mass base in several states. The result in West Bengal is widely depicted as a devastating defeat from which the CPM is unlikely to recover. Yet the Left Front polled 40 per cent of the votes and retains strong roots in rural West Bengal. Communism is part of the mainstream of Indian politics and society, particularly in states with long periods of Left governments. Neo-liberalism will continue to wreak social havoc and there is no reason to expect the communist Left in India, in either its parliamentary or revolutionary form, to fade away any time soon.

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