

Left Front Government of Bengal: A Saga of Struggle

Background

The Left Front Government in West Bengal is not a sudden creation. It is the product of a historic necessity, born out of decades of popular struggle for democratic rights and socio-economic justice.

The continuous rule by the Left Front and its outstanding record in terms of service to the people, protection of democratic rights, preservation of communal harmony and the struggle to implement alternative policies within the limitations of the existing set up - are an inspiring record.

For any political party or coalition being in a State Government continuously for such a long time at a stretch is not only a unique but a remarkable record. Running a State Government by the Left parties under a system where real power rests with the Centre and where the Congress, the BJP and other bourgeois-landlord parties have been in power, is no ordinary achievement. It has been made possible because the CPI(M) and the Left movement has a strong mass base and has struck deep roots among the people.

The existence of the Left Front Government is a pillar for the Left and democratic movement in the country. At every crucial juncture in national politics, the Left Front Government's role has been to project the Left and democratic viewpoint in a situation where major bourgeois parties are acting as agents of the big business, landlords and imperialist capital.

The Left Front Government, in this atmosphere of political instability, is a symbol of stability and pro-people administration. The country and the people look at West Bengal as a source of inspiration and they consider the Left Front Government as the advanced outpost of democratic movement in the country.

Post-Independence Left Mobilization

The present Left Front and its Government have not emerged in a day or two. It has been preceded by a long and uncompromising struggle and sacrifice. Every important turn has a proximate background and this also is no exception for the Left Front. The Left Front Government has been born out of the struggle against the anti-people and autocratic policies of the Congress regime in the post-independence years. The Communists and the Left had a significant role to play in this movement, building left unity through developing democratic movement that afterwards culminated in the formation of the Left Front Government in West Bengal. This is a long story of class struggle and sacrifice of thousands of martyrs.

The first attempt toward forming a united forum to initiate greater unity and understanding amongst the Left and democratic forces was made before Howrah Civic Elections in 1951 when a Progressive Citizens' Bloc [Pragatisheel Nagarik Bloc] by CPI, All India Forward Bloc and some other parties.

Immediately with the Transfer of Power in August 1947 the Left in Bengal led a series of popular movements challenging the undemocratic and anti-poor tendencies of the Congress Government.

It was not very easy even after the end of the colonial rule to pursue democratic movements by the Left and radical forces. In 1948, CPI faced a ban in some provinces including in West Bengal, which was, however, overturned in 1950 by a judgment of the Calcutta High Court.

The Congress Government in West Bengal was not also trouble-free. Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh (1891-1983), first Chief Minister of West Bengal had to resign on 14th January 1948 due to

internal squabbling of the Congress Party. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy (1882–1962), an important member of Ghosh Cabinet and a Congress leader assumed charge as the second Chief Minister of West Bengal.

Left Unity in the First General Elections, 1952

The next important development was the formalisation of an electoral pact between CPI and USO (United Socialist Organization comprising All India Forward Bloc, Socialist Republican Party, Bolshevik Party of India, Indian National Army etc) before the 1952 elections, i.e. the First general Elections after the adoption of the republican Constitution of free India. The pact was signed on 23rd November 1951 by Comrade Jyoti Basu (1914- 2010) on behalf of the CPI and Comrade Ashok Ghosh for the USO.

This immediately initiated greater unity and understanding amongst the non-Congress Left and democratic parties. United they fielded candidates in 143 seats out of 238 in the West Bengal Assembly elections of which CPI contested 71 seats and USO contested 72 seats. In Lok Sabha constituencies the CPI decided to contest in 9 seats and the USO in 8 seats.

However, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) and the Socialist Party stood away this time.

CPI secured 28 seats, thus becoming the largest Opposition party, in the State Assembly. The entire Opposition, including the FB, KMPP, Hindu Mahasabha, Jan Sangha and other independent candidates earned 76 seats, while the Congress bagged 162. In Lok Sabha, CPI earned 5 out of 9 seats—a major triumph for the party.

Swift Progress of Democratic Movement

This was followed by the swift progress of democratic movement in the state making it possible to forge a growing unity of democratic forces. The 1950s saw a new and radical dimension to the state's politics: the movement for the release of political prisoners and those kept behind the bar without trial, the food movement and movement for the reforms and the historic teachers' movement of 1954. Mention may also be made of the agitation against the hike in tram fares and for the demand of nationalisation of the foreign -owned Calcutta Tramways Company, the movement against the proposal of Bengal -Bihar merger and the demonstration of solidarity for the freedom struggle in Goa, then a Portuguese- controlled part of India. In all these movements Communists and the Left as a whole played the key roles.

In 1956, the Central Committee of the undivided CPI had issued an appeal to the all like -minded parties for setting up a Front that would comprise "all socialist, democratic, patriotic and progressive force." In West Bengal, the then Provincial Committee of the CPI attached great importance to the question of the unity of Left parties, as much as on united mass struggles and involvement of more and more people in such democratic struggles.

Left Electoral Committee in 1957

On the eve of the 1957 general elections the CPI, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), the RSP, FB and the Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB) reached an understanding on seat arrangements. The CPI in West Bengal declared a 37-point programme, entitling the 'Ganatantrik Aikyer Karmasuchi' (Programme for Democratic Unity). It was on the basis of this programme that the 'Left Electoral Committee' was formed with Comrade Mohit Moitra, former editor of Sarat Ch. Bose's daily, The Nation, as its convenor.

In Bengal the situation at that time was not favourable enough to form a non- Congress Government. But in Kerala, the CPI itself secured a majority in the newly formed State Assembly (March 1957). Comrade EMS Namboodiripad assumed the charge as the Chief Minister of Kerala. This was the first ever breach in the monopoly of power of the Congress Party.

In West Bengal, the Left parties got 81 seats out of 253, of which CPI alone merged as the winner in 46 constituencies. The result not only demonstrated the marked progress attained by democratic forces, but also established the Communist Party as the leading constituent of the democratic front.

Massive Mass Movement

Following this, the Party adopted concrete steps to ensure an increase of its membership and when its mass base. The success in these endeavours bore fruits the massive post-elections mass movement, especially during Food Movement of 1959. It was the Left who led these movements, although not all of them were able to stick to a principled stand. Notably, the PSP severed all links with the Left, betrayed the masses at the time of Food Movement, and gradually got obliterated from the political scene of the state. Not unnaturally, at the time of 1962 Assembly elections, the PSP was no longer with the Left. The CPI, RSP, FD, MFB, RCPI (Revolutionary Communist Party of India) and Bolshevik Party were now the constituents of the United Left Front.

In the meantime, Prafulla Chandra Sen (1897–1990), a veteran Congress leader became new Chief Minister after the death of Dr. B C Roy on 1st July 1962.

The period between 1962 and 1967 experienced an unprecedented upsurge of democratic movement by the people of West Bengal. The period was a litmus test for true Marxist-Leninists. Right after the polls in 1962, attack were mounted against the Left, and the Communists in particular. Within the CPI itself revisionist elements became very active in disrupting the tactical and strategic issues before the Party. The Congress Government both at the Centre and provinces tried to utilise the 1962 border clash between China and India to marginalise the Left within the Communist Party. The revisionist leadership of the CPI also opted for a policy of co-operation with the ruling classes. Some Left parties, too, joined for sometime the anti-Communist bandwagon.

The subsequent reorganisation of the CPI along Marxist-Leninist principles in 1964, despite many odds, was important for a successful continuation of the task of organising democratic movement. The newly formed CPI (M) took upon itself the historic responsibility of upholding the Left unity and to develop movements in tune with the aspirations of the common masses.

It was in the mid-1960s that West Bengal became the scene of continuous mass struggles for freeing political prisoners, protesting against the hike of prices of essential commodities. These struggles of the toiling masses increasingly alienated the Congress from the people. It was in this backdrop that the Left movement and Left unity received a new fillip. West Bengal now witnessed the largest wave of mass movements since independence.

Fourth General Elections in 1967

The Fourth General Elections in 1967 were held in that backdrop. For the CPI(M), it was the first election to be fought.

In spite of sincere attempts by the CPI (M) and like-minded parties, a single broad based anti-Congress electoral platform could not be forged. Two fronts were formed to fight the elections -- seven-party United Left Front (ULF) with CPI (M), RSP, MFB, RCPI, SSP, SUCI and Worker's Party and the Progressive United Left Front or PULF, which included parties like CPI, FB and Bangla Congress led by the rebel Congress leader Ajoy Mukherjee (? -- 1986) who had been virtually forced to quit the Congress just before the elections. The 1967 General Elections witnessed a major reversal for the ruling Congress. In as many as eight states (including Kerala, Bihar, UP) non-Congress Government were formed. In Kerala the CPI (M) came to head a Government.

Whereas, in West Bengal, the Congress was for the first time reduced to a minority. It managed to get just 127 seats out of 280. Performance of the Left was also not as was expected. The ULF got 68 seats of which the CPI (M) alone won 43 seats, while the PULF secured 65 with the Bangla Congress winning 34 seats and the CPI 16. The people of West Bengal perceived the CPI (M) as the best phalanx against the Congress and vested interests. Despite ceaseless slanders, the people of West Bengal judged CPI (M) as the vanguard party of the Left.

The First United Front Government

Respecting the strong anti-Congress verdict of the people, the ULF and PULF joined hands in the aftermath of the 1967 elections to form the first United Front Government on the basis of a 32-point programme. This was the first non-Congress ministry in West Bengal. In many ways it proved to be a landmark in the history of this state.

Ajoy Mukherjee became the Chief Minister of the United Front Government. Although the CPI(M) had emerged as the single largest Non-Congress party in the State Assembly, its nominee should have technically led the new cabinet. But, CPI(M) sacrificed that post in the interest of sustaining the broad unity against the Congress. Comrade Jyoti Basu accepted the office of the Deputy Chief Minister with independent charge of finance and transport. Two other leaders of the CPI(M), Com. Harekrishna Konar and Com. Niranjan Sengupta were allocated the portfolios of Land Reform and Refugees Rehabilitation respectively.

In spite of adverse of circumstances and non-cooperation of the Centre, the short-lived United Front Government adopted a pro-people approach and initiated democratic and transparent administrative functioning. This was quite a novel experience for the people of West Bengal. The democratic rights of the people were restored. The practice of police intervention on behalf of the management in cases of industrial disputes was abandoned, thereby restoring the basic trade union right. Important efforts were made towards implementation of land reforms. The State Government redistributed 2.38 million acres of ceiling surplus land among the agricultural workers and the rural poor. The right of sharecroppers to a share of the produce of land they cultivated was guaranteed. Besides, nearly 10,000 acres of benami plots of land were identified for distribution among poor peasants. These measures militated against the class interest of the bourgeois-landlord classes. The first United Front cabinet also took over management of the Calcutta Tramways and did a lot to improve the position of the displaced persons who had come from what was then East Pakistan. Municipal rules were revised, rents on slums were reduced and the dearness allowance of Government employees was increased.

These pro-people measures, however, unnerved the Congress Government at the Centre, the state unit of the Congress, vested interests in the society, and a section of the police and bureaucracy who now manoeuvred to topple the popular Government. The Congress took recourse to a two-pronged policy. At one level it sought to break the anti-Congress political formation by fomenting rifts within the Left. On the other hand, it initiated an all-out campaign of lies, motivated propaganda and slanders against the CPI (M) in particular.

Unfortunately, a few of the constituents of the United Front fell prey to these machinations. The Bangla Congress leader Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh - the Food Minister in the United Front cabinet - himself provided the leadership to the anti-Front group. As the Food Minister in United Front he had failed to implement the policy of the United Front and even refused to take minimum administrative action against profiteers and black marketers.

Ultimately on 4th November 1967 he along with 17 other legislators resigned from the Cabinet and left the United Front. Disregarding the protocol he tendered his resignation not to the Chief Minister but to the Governor, Dharam Vira. On 21st November, the Governor dissolved the Ajoy Mukherjee ministry, disregarding all senses of decency and parliamentary ethics.

88-Day Ministry

The Governor then invited Dr. Ghosh to form a so-called PDA (Progressive Democratic Alliance) ministry with Congress backing on 2nd November 1967.

The people of West Bengal, however, refused to accept this undemocratic act of the Governor. A spontaneous general strike was observed in the state on the day after the dissolution of the United Front Government. The Ghosh administration ordered the police to curb the strike with strong hands. But this move proved to be a failure. The CPI(M) now called for the ousting of the Ghosh cabinet, and demanded the holding of mid-term poll to record the people's voice. The Party urged immediate withdrawal of section 144 of the IPC and release of the detained political prisoners. The rallying cry was: "no pardon for the traitors."

Meanwhile on 29th November 1967 the Assembly Speaker, Bijoy Banerjee himself went ahead to declare the Ghosh cabinet as unconstitutional, and prorogued the House sine die. The Congress hoodlums retaliated by hurling bombs at the residence of the Speaker. Under orders of the Governor, the Assembly was again summoned on 14th February 1968. But since the Speaker refused to change his earlier stand on the Ghosh ministry, the 88 day old ministry of P. C. Ghosh had no other option but to tender its resignation on 20th February 1968.

President's Rule

This was followed by President's rule, for nearly one year (20th Feb 1968–25th Feb 1969) during which a reign of terror was let loose against the CPI(M) workers. Over 6000 people CPI(M) activists suffered imprisonment in this period. It should, however, be mentioned that the CPI(M) itself was afflicted by internal dissension created by an ultra leftist section. The Party now had to involve itself both in an ideological struggle within its own ranks and in the campaigns for the coming general elections.

The Second United Front Ministry

The mid-term poll of the West Bengal State Assembly, held on 9th February 1969, was contested by the United Front of 12 Left parties on the basis of a common minimum programme. More than 70 per cent of the electorate exercised their suffrage despite Naxalite threat of sabotaging the poll. In this election the people of West Bengal gave a fitting reply to the Congress machinations against the first United Front regime. Out of 280 Assembly seats the United Front secured 214, the Congress being reduced to a party with only 55 seats. The CPI(M) won 83 seats out of the 101 seats it contested. The election was thus a massive popular mandate for the CPI(M). For the first time in West Bengal, the CPI(M) acquired the status of the single largest party in respect of both the number of seats and percentage of votes. Yet, the CPI(M) once again offered the post of Chief Minister to Ajoy Mukherjee in a rare display of its concern for the preservation of unity within the United Front. Comrade Jyoti Basu assumed the office of the Deputy Chief Minister along with the Home (Police) Department. On 25th February 1969 the second United Front cabinet was sworn in.

The second United Front Government survived for only thirteen months till 19th March 1970. Yet, during this short tenure, it tried to complete the programmes it had initiated during its first tenure. The priorities for the government were Land Reforms, the enactment of the Trade Union Bill and provision of free primary education.

Soon, a deep-seated conspiracy was hatched, not merely to pull down the United Front Government but also to blunt the edge of its militant character.

Strangely enough, the Chief Minister himself became a party to this process. He went on fast as a 'protest' against the 'deterioration' of law and order under and even set up a tent in Curzon Park (now Surendranath Banerji Park), a place just across the Governor's House in Kolkata. Moves were then set afoot to form a Government excluding the CPI (M). Ultimately Ajoy Mukherjee tendered

his resignation on 16th March 1970. In spite of it, the United Front Government could have survived because it had the majority in the Assembly even without the support of the Bangla Congress. However, the CPI, FB and SUC refused to stay with the CPI(M) for reasons they knew better.

In the face of all these happenings the CPI (M) staked its claim to form the next cabinet on the basis of its position as the single largest party in the legislature, but the Governor, Mr. Santi Swarup Dhawan preferred to abide by the dictates of the Central Government and impose President's Rule in West Bengal on 19th March 1970. It was in this period that the notorious semi fascist terror was let loose in the State.

1971 Elections and Denial

The one-year of President's Rule was a period of hard experience for the people of the state. During this period, no less than 238 CPI (M) activists and sympathizers were murdered. Even women and children were not spared.

In this background, the sixth assembly elections were held in March 1971. But the Left failed to present a united dace. Two Fronts were formed – the six- party United Left Front (ULF) comprising CPI(M), RCPI, Worker's Party of India, MFB, Biplabi Bangla Congress, Bolshevik Party and the eight- party United Left Democratic Front (ULDF) comprising CPI, Forward Bloc, SUC, SSP, PSP (Dissident) Gorkha League, a faction of Bolshevik Party and RCPI (Anadi Das Group). Ajoy Mukherjee- led Bangla Congress and RSP did not join any Front.

The ULF bagged 123 seats out of 277 for which elections were held. The CPI (M) alone won 111 seats. On the other hand, the ULDF could win only 25 seats and the Congress 105 seats. The CPI(M) had emerged not only as the largest single party once again, but also secured highest percentage of votes.

Ajoy Mukherjee Ministry Again

But the Governor, Mr. Dhawan refused to comply with the CPI (M)'s legitimate demand to form the cabinet. He first allowed Ajoy Mukherjee to form the next Government, whose party, Bangla Congress, had only five members in the newly elected Assembly. He himself was defeated by Comrade Jyoti Basu in Baranagar, 24 Parganas, though he managed to get a berth in the house by winning a seat from Midnapore district. Along with a few Left parties (CPI and Forward Bloc) the Congress and Muslim League stood by the Ajoy Mukherjee Government, termed as the Democratic Coalition Ministry.

The unholy alliance was bound to be unstable. The Government could not even survive the budget session. But without giving any opportunity to the Opposition and without stating any reason, the Government dissolved the Assembly on 25th June 1971. Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee resigned on 28th June 1971. Next day, the President's Rule was imposed, which continued till 19th March 1972.

A semi-fascist terror was unleashed anew in West Bengal, the CPI (M) suffering the most from this onslaught on democratic rights.

The ruling party in Delhi was still not satisfied. So it made Siddhartha Shankar Roy (1920 –2010) a member of the Union Cabinet without any portfolio to directly execute the Congress game plan in West Bengal.

But in the midst of all these difficulties the CPI (M) continued with the task of consolidating and extending Left and democratic unity and tried to bring back the detractors to the correct political path.

Rigged Elections in 1972

Meanwhile, parliamentary elections were held on 11th March 1972. That was a Black Day in the history of politics in West Bengal. The poll was a farce and we need not really go into analyzing the poll results. These elections saw the CPI joining hands with the Congress, while the eight-party United Left Front (CPIM, RSP, Forward Bloc, RCPI, SUC, Workers' Party, MFB and Biplabi Bangla Congress) fought unitedly. As a protest against rigged elections eight Left parties resolved to boycott the Assembly. On 18th March 1972 a joint statement was issued on this question. However, the RSP allowed its members to take part in the Assembly session in January 1973.

It was with this 'illegitimate' Assembly the Congress formed a ministry on 19th March with S. S. Ray as the 'Chief Minister'. It is now a public knowledge how the years of the Ray regime threw West Bengal in to anarchy and white terror. The state was made a happy hunting ground for the force of authoritarianism. Although 'Emergency' was declared nationally in 1975, in West Bengal it had been virtually clamped down from 1971.

History has, however, proved time and again that the people cannot be kept subdued by terror for long. The ill gotten attempts made during the Emergency to throttle the democratic movement met with failure. The democratic movement gained in strength throughout the country and the role played by Jayprakash Narayan in mobilizing this struggle cannot be forgotten. Even a personality like him was badly assaulted by the Congress backed anti-socials when he visited Calcutta in April 1975.

Congress Defeated

The disastrous electoral debacle of the Congress in the sixth general elections held in March 1977 threw Mrs. Gandhi was thrown out of the Prime Minister's office. Morarji Desai was elected the new Prime Minister of India, introducing a new phase of non-Congress Government in New Delhi.

In West Bengal the democratic movement that was carried on in the face of authoritarianism contributed to a fresh consolidation of Left unity. The beginning of 1977 saw six Left parties working together - the CPI(M), FB, RSP, RCPI, MFB and BBC. During the 1977 parliamentary elections the CPI(M) also forged an alliance with the Janata Party. Along with other parts of the country in West Bengal, too, the Congress was routed in the parliamentary poll, securing only three out of 42 seats.

The First Left Front Government

The next Assembly elections in West Bengal were held on 12th and 14th June, 1977 amidst a tense political situation. Initially, the CPI(M) and 5 other Left parties decided to contest the election by forming an alliance with the Janata Party. For the sake of anti-Congress unity the Janata Party was offered 153, i.e. 52% of the total seats. But the Janata Party wanted to contest 204 seats which implied that the Left could field its candidates in only 90 constituencies. Such unjust demands of the Janata Party ultimately caused a breakdown of alliance between the Left Front and the Janata Party. Unfortunately, the state Janata party decided to oppose the Left in the West Bengal elections. It was in this context that the six Left parties resolved to fight the elections as the Left Front with a 36-point common minimum programme. Comrade Promode Dasgupta (1910-1982), the then Secretary of the CPI(M) State Committee became the Front Chairman. The people gave a massive mandate in favour of the Left Front, which won 230 seats and a two-third majority in the Assembly. The CPI(M) alone secured an absolute majority by winning 178 seats. The Congress had to reconcile itself with returning only 20 of its nominees to the Assembly. The first Left Front Government headed by Comrade Jyoti Basu took the oath of office on 21st June 1977, heralding a turning point in the history of Left movement.

Extraordinary Achievement

Running a State Government by the Left parties under a system where real power rests with the Centre and where the Congress, the BJP and other bourgeois-landlord parties have been in power, is an extraordinary achievement. It has been made possible because the CPI(M) and the Left movement has a strong mass base and has struck deep roots among the people.

The formation of the Left Front Government in 1977 marked the end of a prolonged period of semi-fascist terror and authoritarian rule in West Bengal instituted by the Congress. Under the Left Front Government, there has been restoration of democratic rights and an atmosphere where democratic political activities can take place unhindered.

No other State Government in India has tackled the land question so consistently, which is the foremost question for the bulk of the population which lives in the rural areas. No other Government in India has done as much for the rural poor as the Left Front Government of West Bengal. The fact that 20 per cent of the total surplus land distributed in India is in West Bengal is a testimony to the way the State Government has sincerely implemented land reform laws. Under 'Operation Barga', more than 1.5 million sharecroppers were registered for security of tenure.

The West Bengal set out the model for a democratic *panchayati raj* system much before the advent of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments which institutionalized the *panchayati raj* system.

The implementation of land reforms laid out the basis for the participation of the rural poor and the smaller peasants in the *panchayat* institutions.

Land reforms and the *panchayati raj* system has shaped the course of the rural development in West Bengal. The rural development policy of the Left Front Government has been guided by philosophy of redistribution of assets before growth, to ensure growth with social justice.

The results of this policy are there for all to see. The rate of growth of agricultural production has registered a tremendous increase. In rice production, West Bengal stands first today. The living standards of the rural people had steadily gone up as a result.

The Left Front Government has also shown the way for the country on the vital question of observing the secular principle of the State and maintaining communal harmony.

The issue of social justice is given top priority by the Left Front Government as part of its commitment to better the lot of the most oppressed sections. As far as women's rights are concerned, substantial advance has been made under the Left Front Government. It is well known that West Bengal is free from atrocities on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Incidents of which are regularly reported from many other states and recorded in the Government reports.

The working class has been able to conduct its trade union activities and organized movements for its rights and demands. From the outset, it has been the policy of the Left Front Government not to use the State machinery against the workers.

The Left Front Government has, in the recent period, paid priority and special attention to the industrialization of the state. In doing so, special attention is being paid to generate employment opportunities.

This task is being undertaken in a situation where, for the last two decades, the overall policies of the Centre have been for liberalization and privatization. The Left Front Government is fashioning policies to meet the new situation. As in the past, it shows that it is possible to implement pro-people policies, despite the anti-people policies of the Centre.

Seven Consecutive Terms

The Left Front Government of Bengal had created history by winning the popular verdict of the people of Bengal for the seven consecutive terms (1977, 1982, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006).

Unparallel in the history of parliamentary democracy Comrade Jyoti Basu served the state as the Chief Minister for 23 years – uninterrupted from 21st June 1977 to 6th November 2000, when he voluntarily stepped down on health ground. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee assumed charge as the new CM of West Bengal on 6th November 2000.