

Confronting the ‘Congress System’ in West Bengal: Electoral Strategies of the CPI in the 1950s¹

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Abstract

At the time of Independence Communists support in West Bengal was highly uneven across districts and among classes. It was largely confined to the working class areas in and around the capital, Calcutta. When the CPI decided to contest the West Bengal Assembly elections in 1951 it was not the only Left party which contested. There were several other that competed like the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the two factions of the Forward Bloc, the Bolshevik Party of India etc. In the 1957 elections however the number of Left parties that were in the electoral fray declined. The CPI clearly emerged as the leading Left party in the state by 1957. The electoral strength and support of the CPI went on increasing from 28 seats with 10.76 percent of the votes in 1951-52 to 46 seats with 17.81 percent of votes in 1957. Its performance in the parliamentary elections in the state was also remarkable. Out of the 15 seats which it won in the country as a whole in 1952, 5 were from West Bengal. In 1957 the state supplied 6 of the 27 members of the party which were elected to the Lok Sabha. This electoral as well as the social expansion of the CPI in the 1950s is remarkable considering that the Congress like elsewhere in the Country enjoyed dominance in the state in the 1950s and early 1960s. How was the CPI able to expand its social base in the state in the 1950s? What strategies it pursued to challenge the domination of the Congress in the state? These are the questions which the paper attempts to answer.

Keywords: Congress System, Communists, Strike, Movements, Working Class, Elections

1. Introduction

Although the CPI was born in the 1920s more than nine decades ago but it (including its offshoots) still remains a regional phenomenon. At the most the base of the India Left including the CPI today is limited to three states of the Indian Union, West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. In West Bengal, the Left continued to rule since 1977 till its fall in 2011, in Kerala the Left had been in and out of power since 1957. In Tripura, it had also been in

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and out of power. In another state, Andhra Pradesh where the CPI had built a strong base in the 1940s and early 1950s it failed to develop and the Congress was able to eat away its social base by the 1960s. To Bhabani Sengupta its 'once strong base in Andhra Pradesh disintegrated largely because the urban-oriented undivided CPI rapidly lost ground as soon as the Congress party was able to identify itself with the linguistic sub-nationalism of the Telugu speaking elite' (Sengupta, 1972, p.136).

Even though the Left remained stagnant for a long point of time before its decline in West Bengal still there are a large number of studies on the Indian Left and more particularly on the Left in West Bengal. Out of all the studies on the Left in West Bengal, the literature on how the CPI and later the CPI (M) grew is the most neglected one. There are some that analyse how the CPI (M) grew since the second half of the 1960s till it finally catapulted itself to power in 1977. The studies by Dasgupta (1973), Franda (1971), Rudd (1994), Ghosh (1981), Mukhopadhyaya (1985) etc. are the most interesting of all. The studies however do not focus on the period of the 1950s but concentrate on the second half of the 1960s. Let us not go into the details of these studies. The present study covers a part of the Left history. It looks at how the CPI grew in the state of West Bengal in the 1950s with a focus on its electoral expansion. We are primarily concerned with how; the CPI confronted the 'Congress System' in West Bengal in the 1950s and how it was able to expand itself?

2. The Left in West Bengal

Even though the Communist party in Bengal was born in 1921 it became a significant force in the province only in the late 1930s. To Franda during the 1930s a large number of *bhadralok* terrorists were recruited by the CPI in the jails. These terrorists were active in the province since the partition of Bengal in 1905. Later on many Bengali intellectuals belonging to the same *bhadralok* background in Calcutta and the neighbouring industrial centres joined the party and swelled its ranks. It had a steady growth since then but the partition affected its membership severely since the Bengal CPI got divided as a result of the partition of the country and the province. Franda estimating from various sources found that in 1934, the membership of the CPI was only 37 but it grew to 1000 in 1942 and to almost 20,000 members in 1947. After partition the membership strength was 10,000 in 1947 which grew to 12,000 members in 1954 and to 17, 600 in 1962 (Franda, 1973, p.190).

The Left in West Bengal in the 1950s was a fragmented force. The sources of Left fragmentation were two. Firstly although the CPI was the main representative of the Indian Left there were several other organisations, small, but had a foothold in the state. The RSP for example, was formed in the early 1940s and the SUCI was formed after a split in the RSP in the summer of 1948. The Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the Bolshevik Party were formed in the late 1930s. The Socialists also had a considerable support among the industrial working class in the state. Secondly, the CPI, the main Left force in the state as in the country was also not a united force but had two wings within it out of which the radical or extremist wing was the most vociferous and the

dominant one. By the time of the Burdwan state Conference of 1959 the radical wing was able to elect their man, Pramod Dasgupta as Secretary who took over the charge from Jyoti Basu who was reluctant to serve another term (Mallick, 1994, p.27).

Conventional accounts of the CPI in West Bengal attempt to demonstrate that the party had a considerable presence among the working class and the middle class intelligentsia in the state in the early 1950s (see for example, Ray, 1984). This is only partially true. Among the working class it had a presence but not a very strong one. In the early 1950s, the AITUC, the trade union wing of the CPI claimed a membership figure of 758,314 members from 736 unions in the country. Though the figures were inflated but out of these members most of them came from Bengal and from Madras. It had some presence and this can be made out from some additional facts. Firstly in 1946 two members of the CPI were elected as MLAs. Out of the two one was Jyoti Basu who was elected from the Railway constituency since he was active in the All India Railwaymen's Federation (Mallick, 1994). Secondly it can also be made out from the victories of the CPI which secured 28 seats in the 1951-52 elections and most of the seats came from the urban industrial belt of the state. Out of all the industries, the Communists were most active in the jute industry, the largest of the industries in West Bengal during then. The Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) in 1950 reported that the Communist unions 'with the object of dislocating the industry, took advantage of certain sectional grievances in mills and by systematic propaganda succeeded in bringing about considerable dislocation in the normal working of several mills. Throughout the year there has been a spate of pamphlets castigating employers, Government and non-communist unions, and workers were being incited to resort to violence and lawlessness'. It stated further that despite 'such propaganda, the attempts by the AITUC to stage a general strike on two occasions, viz. in 9th March in sympathy with the railway and postal strike and on 8th November as a protest against the sealing of looms and weekly closures, failed to evoke any response from the jute mill workers' (IJMA, 1950, p.56).

All this in fact suggest that the Communists were active in the trade union front and were able to build their presence in the industrial belt of the state in the early 1950s. Even though this was true but at best the presence was only a marginal one. Everything indicates that the CPI was also not a very stable force even in the working class front. This can be made out from three facts. Firstly when the split occurred in the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1947 a large section of the workers in West Bengal left the AITUC for the INTUC. This was admitted to by the party in its reports later. For example a party document stated 'In 1947 it was the Congressmen and socialists who started new rival organisations and split from the AITUC. The communists never forced any political affiliation on the elections. The Bengal INTUC split on this issue from the central body' (CPI, Report on Trade Union Front, 1952). Another note that was circulated by some prominent members of the CPI who criticised Left sectarianism also pointed out to this

problem confronting the AITUC.² Secondly when the Socialists established the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (Indian Labour Organisation) in December 1948 by splitting the AITUC, the HMS enjoyed a considerable support among the workers in the state. The HMS was in fact born in Howrah near Calcutta which indicates that the Socialists in the AITUC were quite strong within the organisation (see, Masani, 1956). Thirdly the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) which was born in 1949 and came under the control of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) enjoyed considerable support among the working class in Bengal. Its membership of 384,962 workers in 1952 was divided among 332 unions in India and was concentrated almost entirely in West Bengal and Madras (Ornati, 1954).³ Fourthly the INTUC also had a strong presence in West Bengal and much of its members came from the Bengal jute industry. Finally one also notes that trade unions controlled by or affiliated to the CPI in some of the crucial industries like the jute industries were not stable ones. Indrajit Gupta who was the General Secretary of the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU) affiliated to the AITUC speaking in a convention of the AITUC in Calcutta in 1952 stated that in the Jute industry, the biggest industry in West Bengal 95 percent of the workers in the industry were not organised in any trade unions.⁴ Earlier in a similar manner a Government Enquiry Committee in the same industry had found that only 18 percent of the workers out of over 2.6 Lakhs were members of unions in the industry.⁵

Now let us turn to the main concern of the paper. Since the paper is concerned primarily with the question of how the CPI confronted the 'Congress System' in West Bengal in the 1950s during the course of its expansion let us briefly have a look at the 'Congress System' in the state.

3. The 'Congress System' in West Bengal

Before we come to the state of West Bengal let us look at the concept of 'Congress System' in India. It was Kothari who in 1964 coined the term 'Congress System' to categorise the Indian party system which was dominated by the Congress party.⁶ To him, the Congress party was based on a broad consensus and was able to accommodate diverse interests and factions. The factions competed with each other but usually it reached compromises without breaking down the system. Opposition parties worked outside the

² The note however pertains to the problem of the CPI at the national level. The note was circulated by Ajoy Ghosh, S. A. Dange and S. V. Ghate on 30.09.1950. The note was submitted to the Central Committee for circulation among its ranks.

³ Oscar Ornati, Indian Trade Unions Since Independence, Far Eastern Survey, August, 1954.

⁴ Gupta, Indrajit, Capital and Labour in the Jute Industry, All India Trade Union Congress, Bombay, 1953.

⁵ S. R. Deshpande, Report on an Enquiry into conditions of labour in the jute mill industry in India, Delhi, 1946.

⁶ Jones also called it a 'dominant party system' that is a multiparty system, in which free competition among political parties occurred but it was the Indian National Congress that enjoyed the dominant position both in terms of the number of seats which it held in the parliament and the state legislative assemblies and in terms of immense organizational strength (Manor, 1980).

system and used factional leaders of the 'Congress Party' for influencing policy decisions. They acted more as pressure groups and created informal alliances with factional leaders of the Congress. To him the Congress System showed remarkable flexibility in withstanding pressure from its own ranks and also from outside. Very often the programs, the policies, the personnel's of the opposition parties were absorbed by the 'Congress System' (Kothari, 1964). All these to Kothari strengthened the party system in India.

The dominance of the Congress extended to the states as well. Till the fourth general elections state party systems in India like that of the national party system was dominated by the overwhelming presence of the Congress party. The most important reason for its domination was the organisational strength of the party at the state level. At the state level the Congress had a well-developed organisation extending from the village level and the most important fact was that the state units of the Congress were autonomous from the central Congress leadership on several matters. They were free to take decisions of their own. The central leadership did not intervene in the matters of the state unit.

In West Bengal the dominance of the Congress was rather built from 1951 onwards. It appears as if the Congress had lost some of its support particularly in the 1940s in the state.⁷ The decline in the support of the Congress was reflected in the 1951-52 elections. In 1952 even though the Congress had secured 63.02 percent of seats but it had secured only 38.82 percent of votes which was much lesser than the national average for state assemblies. The Congress could actually capture 150 out of the 238 seats with only 38.82 percent of votes. It was only in the 1957 elections that the Congress was able to secure 46.14 percent of the votes and 152 seats which was 60.31 percent of the total seats in the Assembly. In 1962 the percentage of votes of the Congress increased further to 47.29 percent which helped the party to win 157 seats which was 62.30 percent of the total seats.

In this period there was a steady increase in the percentage of votes and seats of the CPI but it seems that it did not come at the cost of the Congress votes or seats since the Congress did not lose much of its seats. It gained both in terms of seats as well as in terms of the percent of votes polled. Its percentage of votes increased in the course of the first three elections. But the increase in the number of seats and percentage of votes as we will see was not at the cost of the Congress but rather it was at the cost of the other Left parties and independents to which we will turn now.

4. The CPI in West Bengal: Immediately After Independence

The CPI after Independence more particularly in the early 1950s was known to be divided into two main factions. The condition of the party in the trade union front in which it had some presence in the country as a whole was not a good one. This is what was revealed by Ajoy Ghosh, S.A. Dange and S.V. Ghate in a note 'A Note on the Present Situation in our Party' which was submitted to the Central Committee of the party on 30.09.1950 that

⁷ The Congress had lost its support particularly because of the partition of Bengal which meant a good percentage of the land and population went out of the state. Hence it would be wrong to suggest that the dominance of the Congress in West Bengal after Independence was built around the legacy of nationalism.

requested it to circulate it in the ranks. The note criticised the Left sectarian and adventurist policies of the leadership in the last two and half years and argued that this was largely responsible for the present condition of the party. It alleged that the party membership had fallen from nearly a hundred thousand to barely 20,000. In this front the most serious problem was in industrial cities and areas where the main strength of the party was. In Tamil Nadu (in Madras Province) the membership was down from 5000 to 200. It further revealed that in many of the important working class centres of the country the bulk of the party workers had gone out of the party or were inactive. It also held that the 'trade unions led by the party are in a state of complete paralysis and stagnation'. To it the real membership of the party was no more than a hundred thousand even though officially it has been stated as eight hundred thousand which existed two years back. Similarly to it in the peasant front the party had also suffered erosion. The peasant unions to it had been wiped out throughout the country except in Bihar, UP and Bengal. It held that 'the party is not today leading a broad peasant movement anywhere'. Even though what had been stated was not the official position of the party but the note by important party leaders indicate that all was not well with the party so far as its membership and support base was concerned. The situation was slightly better in West Bengal and this was revealed when the elections took place.

5. The CPI and the Elections of 1951-1952 in West Bengal

Under this situation the party decided to contest the first general elections of 1951-52. The dates of polling in West Bengal were notified in West Bengal constituencies for both the parliamentary and assembly constituencies. All the dates were in January 1952. The CPI had released its national level election Manifesto on the 6th of August 1951 after the Congress had released its own.⁸ The Congress manifesto which was a 12-13 page document adopted at the Bangalore meeting of the All India Congress Committee in July 1951 promised several drastic measures to the electorate in free India. It promised the implementation of land reforms 'to free the land from the burden of old and outdated agrarian systems of tenure'. It held that the 'abolition of Zamindari, jagirdari and the like must be rapidly completed. Security of tenure and fair rents should be assured to tenants and tillers of the soil'. It felt that the 'condition of agricultural labour should be improved, especially in the lower wage pockets'. It also felt that 'the burden on land of too many people subsisting on it has to be reduced by the diversion of part of this population.' It also promised to achieve economic equality and social justice along with economic progress (AICC, Election Manifesto 1951).

Unlike the Congress Manifesto, the CPI Manifesto which was a much lengthy document began with an attack on Congress rule in the last five years out of which four years were after independence. The CPI began its attack by stating that Congress rule had brought the 'country and our people to the verge of disaster'. It considered the government, the government of national betrayal. It felt that the 'vast mass of peasants, the bulk of our

⁸ Many of the provincial units of the party brought out of their own Manifestoes based on the Central Manifesto. In West Bengal I am not sure whether it did brought out a provincial Manifesto or not but considering its strength it probably did.

people, continue to groin under the burden of rents, debts and taxes. The agricultural workers, the numbers ever swelling as a result of eviction drive of landlords, eke out a miserable existence unable to satisfy even their hunger. The condition of workers worsens every day-their wages lagging far behind the soaring prices.’ And all this was attributed to the failure of the Congress government. It charged the Congress by saying that the ‘leaders of the Congress have not won freedom for our country. They have betrayed our freedom struggle. They have allowed the foreigners and the reactionary Indian vested interests to plunder and loot our people just as they did in the past. They have themselves joined in the loot.’ It dubbed the Congress government as the government of ‘landlords’ and ‘monopolists’, a government of ‘lathis and bullets’ etc.

It criticised the attack of the Congress government on the ordinary people in West Bengal. For example it stated ‘In 1951 the people of Cooch Behar, asking for cheap rice, were greeted with murderous volleys whose echoes resounded in the whole land. The heroic youth of Calcutta, standard-bearers of hundreds of battles, were shot down scores of times to keep in power the corrupt ministry that rules West Bengal with the blessings of Pandit Nehru. Four women were killed by the police in Calcutta on a single day in 1949.’ In its attack it also criticised the suppression of the peasantry by the Congress government in West Bengal in the peasant uprising that took place in Kakwdip. It felt that the Congress government sided with the landlords in this peasant uprising. Because of all this it felt that the ‘Government has proved to be a Government of the enemies of the people of India. It has revealed itself to be a Government of landlords, princes and the most reactionary sections of the Indian capitalists who have betrayed their country to foreign imperialists for a mess of pottage’. It wanted therefore that the ‘Government must go’.

While providing an alternative, the CPI promised the masses, the establishment of People’s Democracy which will be a Government of all democratic parties, groups and individuals representing workers, peasants, middle classes and the national bourgeoisies that stands for genuine industrialisation of the country and for the freedom and independence of India’. It referred to its draft programme and promised to ‘break with the British empire’, ‘cancel peasants debts and transfer all lands and implements of landlords and princes’, without any price to the tillers of the soil, taking care to provide for the poorer sections of the landlords and without harming the interests of the rich peasant.’ It further promised to develop the industries of India with the aid of the nationalised capital and by enlisting the co-operation of the private industrialists who will be assured legitimate profits and protection of their interests’. It promised to ‘grant living wage to the workers, recognise their trade unions and the rights of collective bargaining, introduce social insurance at the expense of the State and capitalists against every form of disability, sickness and unemployment.’ It also promised to ‘protect the rights and interests of all minorities.’ It also promised to ‘eliminate all social and economic disabilities from which women suffer and help them to attain full freedom and equality’. It promised an alternative of a ‘People’s Democratic Government’ which to it will be ‘a government of the common people and not a government of the rich few.’ The government will do away with the whole existing structure of the State and with it the rule of the bureaucrats and

the police'. All organs of this People's Democratic State from the lowest to the highest will be elected by the people, be responsible to them and removable by them'. Finally it appealed to the people to rout the Congress, to make the 'people's candidate victorious' and to 'establish a people's government' (CPI, Election Manifesto of the Communist Party of India: 1952).

With all these promises the CPI entered into the first general elections of 1952.⁹ As has been stated above the CPI was not the only Left party that contested the elections. In West Bengal, the CPI had entered into the election fray with the Forward Bloc (Marxist) and had formed the United Front. There was also an agreement between the CPI and the Bolshevik Party. It however failed to enter into an alliance with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) in the state and had failed to enter into an alliance with the Socialists in the country as a whole. There was in fact a bitter rivalry between the Socialist Party and the Communist party as a result of which there was a considerable amount of vilification from Communist quarters (Masani, 1954). Apart from the CPI there were several others that were in the fray and almost all of them opposed the Congress party led by Nehru. Apart from the CPI, the Leftists included the Bolshevik Party of India (BPI), The Forward Bloc (Marxist Group), The Forward Bloc (Ruikar Group), Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Socialist Party (SP). Thus out of the twelve political parties that participated in the elections ten had leftist leanings whereas two of them were Hindu Nationalist forces namely, All India Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (HMS). There were 614 independent candidates in the fray as well.

Even though the elections were a huge affair and there was enthusiasm but the important English newspapers of the time like the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* tended to ignore the Left altogether. There were only a few reports on the CPI's or other Left's election campaign. This was probably because no one had expected the CPI to pose any kind of challenge to the Congress. In contrast the campaign in the state by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the Jana Sangh leader received a lot of attention.

The Congress election campaign was led by Nehru and other state level leaders. So dominant was he in the campaign strategy of the Congress that one commentator remarked that the Congress campaign was 'a one man affair-Nehru, Nehru and more Nehru. He was chief of staff, field commander, spokesman and foot-soldier at one and the same time' (quoted in Guha, 2002, p.98). Nehru who arrived in West Bengal for a two-three day election tour on 31st December 1951 emphasised on inter community amity which he felt could only ensure the foundation of a strong and united India. He came to the conclusion that if Congress does not carry on the government and left it to smaller

⁹ The elections itself was a colossal affair in which 176 million Indians aged 21 or older, of whom around 85 percent were illiterate were to vote for 4,500 seats in the Parliament and more importantly for the Legislative Assemblies (Guha, 2002, p.96). In West Bengal the total number of elector's were 12489270 out of which 7443903 actually turned out to vote. There were 1374 candidates and the polling percentage was 42.23 percent.

parties the country would break down. He assured the people that the Congress government would set the country on the path of Progress inspite of internal disorders and difficulties (The Statesman, Calcutta, 1st January, 1952, p.7). In his speeches that he made he called upon the people of India to declare a war, not against any foreign power, but on poverty, and to consolidate their hard won freedom by concerted action. He wanted the people to come out of the orbit of sectarianism, and condemned communalism, provincialism, and caste barriers (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, January 1st 1952, p.1). He further emphasised on the historical role of the Congress since its inception and said that the history of India of the last thirty years was the history of the Congress; and the history of the Congress of that period was the history of India. The Congress was the most powerful people of India by which they would win their economic freedom (ibid).

Important state level campaigners for the Congress were Atulya Ghosh the President of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee and B.C. Roy, the Chief Minister of the state. Ghosh emphasised in his meetings that the Congress was contesting the elections with a well thought of constructive programme for building up the nation. He criticised the others by saying that the other political parties were mainly directing their energy in criticising the Congress. Similarly B. C. Roy in his addresses asserted that it is only the Congress that can lead the nation to prosperity (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, December 29, 1951). He also urged the people to vote for the Congress because the Congress could ensure them a stable and powerful government to steer the country in this difficult period (Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 21, 1952, p.5).

The Left and the Right both criticised the Congress government and also Nehru. The Left in fact made a determined effort to convince the voters. One report in the ABP said that the Ultra Leftists had almost monopolised all the parks in Calcutta since the election process started. The RSP candidate for Parliament from North East Calcutta branded the Congress as the party of the vested interest and urged the people to vote for RSP candidates. The objective of the RSP to him was to fight from inside the legislature as from outside, against the Congress (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, December 24, 1951, p.1). The CPI leader Muzzaffar Ahmed in a statement during the elections criticised some of the orders of the state government for facilitating the election campaigns of Nehru. To him all this indicated that the authorities have really no intention of ensuring free election in the state (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, January 3, 1952, p.3).

The most interesting aspect of this election campaign was the note/letter that was issued by some prominent citizens of Calcutta on January 21, 1952 urging upon the people not to be misled by the Communist propoganda against the Congress. The note pointed to the misdeeds of the Communists. It said:

The CPI, the people of India cannot forget, allied themselves with the British to defeat the freedom movement of 1942. They tried to belittle Netaji by pointing him as stooge of the Japanese...They were the collaborator's of the British whose war efforts resulted in the famine of 1943 and took a toil of four million lives in

Bengal. Their hands are still tinged with the blood of millions of their countrymen.

The people of Calcutta will remember how in recent past they sought to paralyse the city life by making almost daily determined attack on the peace of the city. They burnt down tram cars, made attacks with bombs, bullets and brickbats in the city streets and brought about a situation when the ordinary working people find it risky to go about their daily life (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, January 21, 1952, p.1&5).

Amidst this campaigning and counter campaigning the CPI and others were able to garner considerable support for themselves to which we will turn later. What needs to be pointed at this moment is that during the counting period when the first election results were pouring in, newspapers like Amrita Bazar Patrika published headline columns like ‘Communists routed in West Bengal’, ‘Leftists Forefeit Deposits’ ‘Electoral verdict against the Leftists’ etc. (The Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 21, 1952, p.1). All these reports highlighted the defeats of the CPI candidates at various places in West Bengal where counting was taking place. All this also indicated that the daily English newspapers had no sympathy for the Communists.

When the final results appeared it became clear that the CPI had emerged as the major opposition in the state. It had contested 86 seats out of which it could win 28 with 10.76 percent of votes. The KMPP had contested 129 seats out of which it could win 15 with 8.97 percent of votes next only to the CPI as an opposition. The Forward Bloc (Marxist Group) could secure 11 seats out of the 48 that it contested and could manage 5.29 percent votes. The most interesting feature of this assembly election was that the independents could secure 19 seats with 22.21 percent of votes hence the independents as a category was only second to the CPI. Interestingly even though the Congress had secured the majority of 150 seats but the vote percentage was only 38.82 percent which was much lower than the national average for assembly elections.

The CPIs seats came mainly from those constituencies that had a considerably working class population and this was obvious considering that the CPI was active mainly in the trade union/working class front in the late 1940s. Even though West Bengal’s industrial base particularly the jute industry suffered due to the partition of the country but the state was still the most industrialised state in the country with a huge workforce. ‘In 1946 West Bengal had a large number of factories and factory employees than in any other province in India’ (Bagchi, 1998, p.2975). In 1951 total employment in factories in West Bengal amounted to 6,54,901 (ibid.) Considering that there was a large workforce working in factory industries in the state out of which most of them were located in and around Calcutta the CPI was engaged in the task of mobilising this workforce even though it was weak in this front which we have seen earlier. Hence it was very natural that much of the

seats of the CPI came from constituencies that had a considerable presence of the working class and the middle class.

Thus out of the 28 seats that it won in the Assembly most of the seats came from the urban industrial constituencies and only a few from rural constituencies like the Ghatal (SC) Constituency. It won both the seats in the double member Ghatal constituency which was purely a rural one in Midnapore district of Southern Bengal. Similarly if one notes the performance of the party in the Lok Sabha one also note that almost all the seats that it won was from the industrial or urban constituencies and very few came from rural Bengal. Out of the five constituencies where it won four namely Serampore, Basirhat, Diamond Harbour and Calcutta North East were the constituencies which had a good section of the industrial workforce. Only Ghatal Lok Sabha seat in Midnapore district was a rural one which the CPI won. Out of the three other Left seats (RSP, 2 & HMS, 1) 2 were from the urban-industrial belt and Berhampore was a partly rural and party urban constituency.

It was however not simply that the CPI did well in all the constituencies where it had a strong support and it was active. It got defeated in some of its strongholds. For example, in Howrah town there were four constituencies out of which the CPI could win only 1 and the Congress could win 3. This was despite of the fact that in the municipal elections that had taken place almost a year ago the people of Howrah have voted the Communists and other Left parties to power.

The CPI was jubilant with the electoral results at the national level. It felt that the 'Communist party has emerged from the elections as a major force, as the most serious opposition to the Congress'. Commenting on its electoral performance in West Bengal it stated that in 'Bengal, the party won 30 seats of which 22 lie in Calcutta and in the adjoining districts of Howrah, 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Burdwan. Six seats were won in Midnapore. Party's base in Bengal, in many areas lies, as election show, mainly in the middle classes and not in the working class. In North Bengal, the arena of the Tebhaga struggle, the party failed badly. Even in Cooch Behar, which witnessed big food demonstrations and firing last year, the Congress won all the seats.' It also felt that the 'United Front embracing the Communist Party, Forward Bloc and the KMPP and covering the whole province could have inflicted a crushing defeat on the Congress. Such a front did not come about mainly due to the insistence of the KMPP on contesting too many seats. The Party was late in giving the slogan of an alternative Government and could not also develop a sufficiently strong unity movement.' On its weakness the party felt that the most 'serious weakness which the results of the elections showed is the weakness of the Party in the working class, the weakness of the trade union movement, the deep split in the working class'. It felt that except in 'some of our trade union bases of Tamilnad, in...and in predominantly Bengali working class areas of Calcutta and suburbs, we fared poorly in industrial areas. In most of the major industrial centres, the party failed to win seats'. It also felt 'Hindustani speaking workers of Bengal voted for the Congress'. It further felt that in order to become a national political force it must be a major political force in the industrial centres of the country (CPI, On the Results of the General Elections 1952 and the Tasks Before the Party).

Even though the CPI was jubilant people were probably surprised with the showing of the CPI in the elections in West Bengal. The surprise was revealed in different newspapers. Amrita Bazar Patrika while analysing the West Bengal Assembly Elections noted that ‘the Communist Party, coming out of the three year old ban which was held ultra vires by Calcutta High Court only 11 months –before the polling commenced here, surprised even its own estimates according to party circles by capturing 28 of the 79 seats it contested with the backing of 11.13 percent of the votes... (Amrita Bazar Patrika, February 15, 1952). The paper however expressed doubts whether it will play the role of an effective and constructive opposition in the Assembly or not?

Bijay Ratna Mazumdar in a short essay in the Amrita Bazar Patrika reported ‘the results of the general elections point unmistakably to the emergence of the Communist party as the largest single block in opposition to the Congress in some of the states...If this meant that the Communists would now lay aside their programme of destructive and lawless activity and follow constitutional methods for consolidating their position, it would not be a matter of any grave anxiety or concern. But this is far from being the case...It is indeed the very breadth of their existence to bring about chaos and confusion by every imaginable means. It is only in disorder and violence the Communists can create and propagate their influence. Their favourite cry is ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ which is to keep up indefinitely the misery, the confusion and the havoc which inevitably accompanies a revolution... (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, February 13, 1952, p.4).

In the aftermath of the 1952 elections the CPIs support in the working class front and among the middle class seems to have increased though in the peasant front there was no appreciable increase in its strength or following. This was despite the fact that in April 1954 the Central Committee of the CPI had given the call to support the poor and the middle, and rich peasants against the landlords for land, for fixity of tenure and even for reduction of rent and to draw the agricultural labourers in this support. It held that the ‘party and the Kisan movement must vigorously take up and champion the immediate demands of the agricultural labourers, as well as their basic demand for land. It is only by taking up these demands of the agricultural labourers that we can draw them into the movement against landlordism, against the ruling class and for land, freedom, democracy and peace’ (CPI, Our Tasks Among the Peasant Masses, 1954). It therefore gave the call for organising the agricultural labourers even separately and also the peasants. But the Kisan Sabha in West Bengal seems to have failed in this attempt hence the party remained a party of the working and the middle class in the mid of the 1950s.

The party was able to extend its support among the middle class through different agitations in the second half of the 1950s. The two important agitations were; the movement against Bengal- Bihar merger of 1956 and the Teachers movement of 1957. Earlier in 1953 it had also led the Anti Tram Fare Increase Movement of 1953. The greatest movement out of all these was the Food Movement of 1959 to which we shall refer later. The Roy-Sinha statement issued on 23rd of January 1956 proposing ‘reunion’ of West Bengal and Bihar helped in the consolidation of the Left and Democratic forces in the state. Although the statement was welcomed in Bihar dominated by the Congress but

in West Bengal there was not much enthusiasm except among the Congress supporters. The Left, the CPI and the PSP opposed the move stating that if the proposal is given effect it would simply strangulate Bengal, its language and culture (Chatterjee, 1956). On 27th of February the Secretaries of the West Bengal and Bihar committees of the Communist parties in a joint statement in Calcutta condemned the merger proposal and advocated a settlement of the boundary dispute 'strictly on the basis of language and contiguity'. The Leftists decided to resort to 'direct action'. The parties united under the West Bengal Linguistic State Reorganisation Committee, started a civil disobedience movement in Calcutta on 24th February. The movement spread to all the districts of West Bengal. The movement even though was peaceful but 7,000 persons were arrested till the mid of April (Chatterjee, 1956). It was even though mainly an urban phenomenon restricted to Calcutta and Moffussil towns it was the most significant one that was launched by the CPI along with other Left parties in the state and it helped the CPI to expand its support among the middle class. The increase in this support was visible when the second general elections were held in 1957.

6. The CPI and the Elections of 1957 in West Bengal

The CPI released its national level election Manifesto in January 1957. The manifesto began with a bitter critique of the Congress government in the country. It alleged that the Congress government had betrayed its pledges. It felt that despite of the policies of the government 'old conditions persist'. 'Economically' the country remain backward and dependent, the public sector remains in a rudimentary state and weak, agriculture to it had remained primitive, dependent on the vagaries of monsoon, poverty and destitution stalked the land, rich had grown richer, national unity has got disrupted etc. Thus to the CPI the claims of the Congress that all sided advancement had been registered in the country in recent years cannot be substantiated by facts. The policies which the Congress had pursued were basically anti people.

The CPI promised that it will work for the task of reconstruction of the country. For national reconstruction it emphasised on radical and far-reaching measures that included the development of heavy and basic industries, the non-payment of compensation to Zamindar's, stopping of privy purses to princes, ensuring the working class it's just share in the wealth created by its labour, land to the tiller, ceiling on landholdings in the rural sector etc. The party pledged to do 'everything in its power to achieve unity among the Left and democratic forces in the coming elections and promised that it will put forward 'its own candidates in areas where it has a sufficiently strong mass base' (CPI, 1957). It appealed to the people to support it 'not merely on the basis of its programme but also on the basis of its work for the country and devoted service to the people' (CPI, 1957).

Much before the elections 5 major Left parties including the CPI and the PSP combined on common issues and decided to fight the elections united. The other parties were the RSP, FB and FB (Marxist). They launched a joint campaign. The joint campaign was inaugurated on the 12th of January 1957 by Dr. Praffula Chandra Ghosh the Chairman of the West Bengal PSP who was confident that the programmatic alliance brightened the prospect of forming an alternative government by the Leftists in WB after the election.

Ajoy Ghosh, the General Secretary of the CPI was also confident that they will win the elections. There were three points on which there was an agreement reached among the parties. These points were; introduction of an unemployment relief scheme, removal of the existing disparity among the minimum and maximum income and thirdly undertaking of responsibility of compulsory free education. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh also assured the people that if the Leftists could form a government in West Bengal it would be able to weed out corruption, nepotism now rampant in the administration. To him only a Leftist government could set the administration on the right line (Amrita Bazar Patrika, Kolkata, January 13, 1957, p.1).

The combination was called United Left Election Committee and they felt that the chance of coming to power in West Bengal for them was always bright. The CPI leaders including Jyoti Basu felt that even though the Congress would return to power at the centre but in West Bengal as matter stood the United Left Forces have bright prospect of winning the elections. This was because in West Bengal the Leftists (particularly the CPI) had come in contact with people of different walks of life-peasant, workers and middle class... (ibid). The Leftists also released a programme in which they attacked the Congress ideal of building a socialist pattern of society. To them the Congress was perpetuating production for profit and strengthening the monopoly capital, widening the economic disparities and frustrating the hopes of establishing real democracy. It stated that if it comes to power it could devote to (a) eradicate corruption and reforming administrative machinery (b) proper and quick rehabilitation of refugees (c) reform of educational system by introducing free and compulsory elementary education (d) separation of the executive from the judiciary (e) effective steps for reducing and gradually removing unemployment (f) distribution of all available land to landless agricultural labour and poor peasants, (h) fixation of highest and lowest salaries and such other measures to improve the standard of living (Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 19, 1957, p.5).

There was another alliance of the Left forces which came up and this was called the 'United Left Front' which comprised of 8 parties namely Socialist Unity Centre, Bolshevik Party, Democratic Vanguard, Bengal Provincial Forward Bloc, Communist League, Workers and Peasants League and Sadharantantri Dal. This front provided a critique of the Congress and the other Left alliance and claimed that their programme was the only genuine Left programme and argued that the Congress party was losing its popularity among the masses and hence it is increasingly resorting to its slogan of 'Socialistic' pattern of 'Society' which was nothing but a 'ruse' based on the knowledge of mass aspiration for socialism and end of exploitation (Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 9, 1957, p.3). It also criticised the alliance of the other Left parties and stated that it was reformist and had shown utter disregard to unity with other Left forces and lacked in any analysis of the basic problems of the society. To them it was negative and only a collection of slogans (ibid).

West Bengal went to polls from March 1, 1957 and the polling ended on the 14th of March. There were 252 Assembly seats for which 944 candidates contested. The United

Left Election Committee claimed that it had put forward candidates in 234 seats out of which the CPI decided to contest 103 seats. The PSP contested 67 whereas the Forward Bloc (Marxists) contested 26 seats. The special feature of this election was that the number of Left parties contesting was much lesser than in the 1951-1952 elections. Only three Left parties contested including the CPI. There is however a possibility that some of the Leftists must have contested as Independents and had used free symbols. The United Left Front claimed that it had put forward 45 candidates.

When the results were announced, as expected, the Congress had secured 152 seats out of 251 contested which was 60.31 percent of the seats with 46.14 percent of the votes. The CPI secured 46 seats out of the 103 contested which was 18.25 percent of the total seats in the state Legislative Assembly. Out of the seats that it won most of the seats were from the urban industrial constituency which consisted of a large section of the working class population and the middle class. There were only a few outside this industrial-urban working class seats that it won. For example it won from the Jore Bungalow constituency in the hills of Darjeeling. The CPI in all won 4 seats in North Bengal out of the 29 seats that belonged to this region. In some of the working class constituencies it secured more than 50 percent of the votes polled. It secured the highest percentage of votes from the Manicktola constituency in Calcutta where it secured almost 67 percent of the votes polled.

In its analysis of the elections, the CPI though was jubilant but it also recognised its limitations. In the extraordinary Congress of the party held in Amritsar in 1958 the party stated that 'by polling 12 million votes, we have become the second party in the country not merely in terms of seats won but also in terms of votes secured. We have doubled our votes since 1951-52. We won the majority of the seats in the industrial areas and proved ourselves to be the single biggest force in the working class. We retain our position as the major party of opposition in the Indian parliament and in the State Legislature of West Bengal and Andhra' (CPI, 1958). It stated further 'This time we polled 23 lakh votes in Kerala, 19 lakh in West Bengal, 25 lakh in Andhra and over 10 lakh in Punjab.' Commenting on its limitations in the state of West Bengal it said '...our influence varies considerably from area to area. In West Bengal, for example, where we are a strong force, our effective strength is confirmed to some districts. In other districts, influence is still meagre' (CPI, 1958).

Even though the results reflected advancement in the sense that the party secured more seats and votes but a closer examination of the results reveals that the party was still confined to the urban middle class and the working class areas in the state. Its hold on the peasantry was very limited. It could contest only those seats mainly belonging to the urban industrial area but did not contest the majority of the rural constituencies considering that it had no possibility of winning the seats since it had no base in the areas. Hence the seats which it won and the seats which it contested all this demonstrate that the CPI'S base was growing but still was restricted to the urban and industrial areas in the state. The CPI could create this base by 'organising urban protest movements by mobilising the white collar Bengali middle class bhadralok, the refugees, students and the

urban industrial proletariat' (Chatterjee, 1984). The CPIs presence in rural Bengal was negligible since it abandoned its militant strategy in the early 1950s and was moving towards becoming a parliamentary opposition in the country. Whatever support it had built in the countryside in the 1940s was eroded by the early 1950s and this had become clear when the first general elections were held in the country.

The CPI could build its rural base only with the food movement of 1959 in the state. The food movement is considered to be a turning point in the political history of West Bengal. This was a movement which was a wide movement and helped the CPI and also the other Left to increase their social base. It is with this movement the CPI enters-enters into the countryside. This was realised by the party. Reviewing the movement a year after, the party in 1960 felt that the West Bengal food movement, too, was massive in character with mass participation of the peasantry all over the State' (CPI, Work Report of the Secretariat of the National Council of the CPI from November 1958 to April 1960). The other protest upsurges by the CPI in the 1950s like the Anti Tram Fare Increase Movement of 1953, the movement against Bengal-Bihar merger of 1956 and the Teachers movement of 1957 were urban centred and did not help the CPI to enter into the rural areas of the state.

Shortage of food was a problem in the state since the transfer of power. The CPI held the food policy of the B. C. Ray led Government responsible for the food shortage in the state. For the Communist party Jyoti Basu, the leader of the opposition toured throughout the state covering the rural areas and warned the government of near famine conditions in the villages in 1956 and demanded that rice be provided at a subsidised price (Das & Bandyopadhyaya, 2004, p. X). The Left in West Bengal was in favour of fixing the price of paddy and rice by the new government, imposition of a compulsory levy of 25 percent on the products of the rice mills, levy on the jotedars owning 10 acres or more cultivable land, stringent measures against hoarders and black marketers and seizure of unauthorised stock of food, etc.

The movement started on 10th February 1959 and continued till the end of 1959. On June 15th a protest day was observed throughout the state and this was followed by demonstrations throughout the state on the 20th of June. On the 25th of that Month a successful state wide hartal (general strike) was organised. Later on civil disobedience movement was organised throughout the state particularly in various places firstly in Midnapore district and then in other districts of Hooghly, Birbhum, Burdwan, Nadia, Puruliya, West Dinajpur and other districts under the joint leadership of the CPI and the Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC). The high point of the movement took place in August-September 1959 mostly in Calcutta where large meetings were organised and attempts were made on August 31st by the protesters to storm into the Writers Building. Police action followed, people were lathi charged and teargassed on the 31st night. The movement however was called off by the PIFRC on 26th of September.

During the entire course of the movement many died (estimates range from 30 to 80) and several others were injured.¹⁰

The movement was an important milestone in the development of the CPI in the state. The CPI while reviewing it held that the 'West Bengal food movement, it should be noted, had played a big part in focussing the country's attention on the food situation and in this the Communist Groups in Parliament used the forum quite effectively. It was in this background that the Food Minister A.P. Jain was forced to quit office.' There were several effects of the Food movement in the state the most important however was that the CPI was able to gain legitimacy before the masses in the state in urban as well as in rural areas. It could enter or reenter the rural areas. It was not only that the CPI was leading the food movement during the period; its trade union organisation was also active in the working class front. This can be made out from the report of the Chairman of the Indian Jute Mills Association for the year 1959, the association of the biggest industry in the state which was also the most powerful one. Commenting on the General Labour situation in the industry the chairman said:

With few exceptions, our labour worked well last year and relations on the whole were good, despite some provocative utterances from rather unexpected quarters. Although the number of man hours lost through strikes in 1959 was more than double that of the previous year, less than a quarter of the man hours lost were due to industrial disputes in individual mills. The remaining three quarters were a direct result of three general strikes, of which two were called by the Leftist Unions as a protest against the food policy of the state Government and thus had nothing to do with the industry at all. The third was called by the I.N.T.U.C unions, with the support of the other unions, on the 14th of December to press a Charter of Demands which had previously been presented to the industry, and which had formed the subject of bipartite negotiations between representatives of the Association and of the unions (IJMA, 1960, p. 2).

He further commented:

The federations of trade unions were dominated by political rivalries which influenced the attitude and activities of their component units. There was greater activity by the two major federations viz. the I.N.T.U.C. and B.P.T.U.C each trying to increase its influence by enlisting members but unions at the unit level affiliated to these federations still do not truly represent the workers, Individual unions, however, showed a desire to settle local disputes by direct negotiation but the presence of rival unions owing allegiance to different political parties often came in the way of reaching an agreement (IJMA, 1960, p. 55).

¹⁰ To the Government 30 people were killed where to the CPI 80 people died during the movement.

The report of the Chairman of the largest industry association in the state indicates that communists were active in the working class front as well although the most important programme which they spearheaded was the food movement in the state in 1959. Owing to these activities, the support of the party increased in the countryside as well. This increase was manifested when the elections were held three years later in 1962. The CPI could contest 145 seats which reflected that the party had expanded. The CPI could increase its seats both in the urban as well as in the rural areas. It won 50 seats out of the 145 contested. Its vote share also increased, it polled 24.96 percent of votes. The Left overall secured 72 seats out of the 252 Legislative Assembly seats which was a huge increase from its tally of 1957.

Summing Up

To sum up it can be said that though the CPI had made some progress in the country in the electoral front in the 1950s this was restricted only to a few states namely Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. We have seen that this was admitted by the party in its extraordinary Congress held in Amritsar in 1958. In West Bengal, the CPI confronted a Congress party which was relatively much weaker than it was in many of the states in the country. The CPI in the 1950s was a force to reckon with and it could increase its position mainly by leading urban and working class agitations in the state. It led the Anti Tram Fare rise movement, Teachers Movement and anti Bihar-Bengal merger movement which helped it in increasing its support in the urban areas and later it could penetrate into the countryside with the Food Movement of 1959. But the most important thing about the increase in electoral support of the CPI was that its expansion didn't come much at the loss of support of the Congress but it came mainly at the expense of the other Left forces and independents in the state. The support for the Congress also increased with every successive election till the 1962 elections.

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