

Anatomy of a Problem State

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ANATOMY OF A PROBLEM STATE

West Bengal has become a crisis-prone state, subject to constant rabble rousing. The dimension of her deep rooted crises, arising out developmental paradoxes and cultural complex has rarely been considered by concerned authorities. With a highly densed population and concentration of economically weaker sections, this state could never see the light of recovery since independence. Not to speak of others who join the rabble rousers in condemning this declining state, even the left front government had to admit that "noticeable feature about the economy of West Bengal for the past many years is the stagnation in structural terms".¹

Unique Features

West Bengal has to accommodate 8% of the population in 2.7% of the area of the country. The density of population is second highest, next only to Kerala, above national average being 615 per sq. km. (India 216). It has a high concentration of Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes population, constituting 26% of the State's total population (India 22%).² And the economic data reveal that they remain the symbol of backwardness and deprivation. Land utilisation is highest in this state, 63.3% of the total area has been cultivated. Agriculture in the state has remained handicapped by small holdings and complications arising out of absenteeism. 70% of the tenant cultivators own less than 5 acres of land. As we know, 5 acres' holding is supposed to be economic and viable. About 41% of the cultivated land in West Bengal belong to small farmers having less than 5 acres of land.

1. *Memorandum to the Seventh Finance Commission, Govt. of West Bengal, 1978.* p. 35.

2. *Ibid.*

The industrial wealth and power are practically beyond the control of the State Government. In the sphere of taxation and financial allotment, the states have no say. As there is little scope to procure revenue from the marginal agriculturalists, the State could exist on her industrial resources. But the state would not be benefitted by any industrial expansion both in the way of additional revenue and employment. The advantages from exports are also enjoyed not by the state. Thus the state has its economic crisis rooted in the paradoxes of: i) disparity between wealth and taxing power, (ii) disparity between expansion and employment. Industrial expansion do not accrue more taxes to the state, neither increase in investment lead to proportionate job creation. The growth pattern has also been uneven. According to Dutta, 40% of the total net domestic product comes from Calcutta and four neighbouring districts of Howrah, Hooghly, 24-Parganas and Burdwan.³

All these paradoxes and unevenness however, owe its origin to Imperialist legacy that has virtually set the present economic decline.

The Imperialist Legacy

The pattern was set in 1830's when the balance of trade came in favour of Britain. In 1815, India exported cloth amounting to Rs. 13 million, the amount declined to only Rs. 1 million in 1832. In 1800, not a single yard of cloth was imported from Britain, Manchester clothes first came in 1814, since then the balance was being reversed in favour of the ruling nation.⁴ Subsequently, the British rulers could orient the economic networks to utilise this resourceful state as the hinterland of exploitation.

3. Bhabatosh Dutta : Industrial Growth in West Bengal, in *Resurgent West Bengal* (Ed) S. Ghosh. 7th Plenary Session of Congress. 1972, p.11.
4. Provat Mukherjee : *Rammohan O' Tatkalin Samaj O' Sahitya*, P 26. Viswabharati, 1972.

The growth of nationalism in Europe and India had different streaks. As Narendra Deva held, in Europe nationalism might be the product of industrialism, but in India it was not so. Industrialism was built up in Great Britain at the cost of India. Britain could grow and extend her colonies where industrial outputs had a ready market. The colonies also served as the base of supplying cheap raw materials. Thus Great Britain was doubly benefitted. Backwardness and poverty of India grew deep due to this system of colonial exploitation. So in India, nationalism grew out of people's urge to fight against British imperialism and break the shackles of slavery. It was identified as much with economic as with the political freedom.⁵

The British rulers tried to create a buffer class through Permanent Settlement (1793). But the landed middle class *bhadraloks* in Bengal, imbibed with the implications of western thought, could form their own value system leading to nationalistic aspirations. They had openings in industry, administration, education and other white collar jobs in the area. Subsequently, urge for self-identity led them to play the vanguard role of a moderniser and liberator. The trend was represented in nineteenth century renaissance and leaders like Rammohun, Vidyasagar, Vivekananda, Bankim Chandra, Young Bengal, Brahma Samaj, Rabindra Nath Tagore etc. This legacy of being reformer and moderniser, or the renaissance as a whole, composed the unique characteristics of Bengalee nationalism.

The Bengalee *bhadraloks* are very susceptible to outside pressures, as well as conscious about her sacrifices and contributions to national causes. The only viable national platform, Indian National Congress and its all India leaders could never appreciate this sentiment and identity factor.

From its very inception, Indian National Congress stood poles apart from Bengal's nationalistic aspirations. Inspired

5. Acharya Narendra Deva : *Towards Socialist Society*, (Ed) Brahmaand, P. 6, New Delhi, 1979.

by the writings and messages of Bankim Chandra, Swami Vivekananda, Aurobinda etc. Bengal's militant nationalism advocated violence and armed actions against the British, sometimes it took the form of individual terrorism. Moderate Congressmen were no match for them. Moreover, their elitist tendency to keep the Congress as a closed platform for negotiation, further isolated them from the Bengal nationalists. It was widened on the eve of moderate-extremist feuds. The then moderate leaders used to gag dissenting forces through the proviso of Subject Committee. As Aurobindo described the Congress as 'ring of two or three successful lawyers', 'timid dabblers in politics' etc. This in-built isolation of Congress from the Bengalee bhadralok section could never be bridged.

The Economic Backlog

The present malady of the state economy lies in discriminating public finance and tax policy, which has its antecedence in British India. In 1935, through Mantague-Chelmsford Reform, taxing powers of centre and state governments were separated, provinces were made dependent on land tax. In their enthusiasm for separating financial powers, they sowed the seed of financial disparity. Reviewing the situation, Meston Committee admitted that Bengal had inelastic revenue sources and it would have very moderate start in financial career. But considering its 'size, intrinsic wealths, economic possibility' the committee didn't offer any advantage to the state. The committee however "failed to note that the great economic possibility was being put outside the taxing power of the Provincial Government which with an inelastic revenue, was called upon to eke out an existence by taxing the province's decaying peasantry".⁶ In 1932, Second Peel Committee recommended an allotment of share to State from jute duty, and the share was given in 1934 to avoid a financial collapse

6. Dr. B. C. Roy : Problems of West Bengal, in *Resurgent West Bengal*, op. cit. p-II.

of the State. But after independence, it has been scrapped. As Dr. B.C. Roy said, "this was the beginning of financial disparity which has grown and assumed serious dimension now. For her very existence, West Bengal has to depend almost wholly on her industrial wealth and its expansion, but the state government would not in any commensurate degree benefit from the taxes which such industrial expansion would bring".⁷

This handicapped position was further deepened with partition and burden of some 6 million refugees. Far from being accommodating, the central financial policy and politics were manipulative and discriminatory in the the sphere of relief measures and other freight rules. The East Bengal refugees were not given any compensation as the West Pakistani refugees did get from the centre. The plea was one of Nehru-Liaquat pact of 1950. We know how the pact was thrown away as waste paper by Pakistan. The flow of East Pakistan refugees continues as ever, not to speak of Bangla Desh war in 1971, even now infiltrators pose big threat to state's economic balance. And centre's decision to equalise steel and coal freight all over the country did put an end to State's locational advantage for being close to coal-mining and steel producing areas. Moreover, this freight equalisation was not extended to cotton, thus creating problems for the cotton mills in West Bengal.

Socio-Cultural Complex

Bengal has always remained outside the periphery of mainstream Indian politics. Even during the all encompassing administrative network of Moghul rulers, this land was marginally ruled without any living link with the state. Historically too, Bengal has been a source of non-conformism and dissidence. In social customs, norms as well as in cultural orientation, Rabindranath Tagore has remarked, Bengal's genius in assimilation power is her speciality. Through

7. *Ibid.*

assimilating from various sources, Bengal could vitalise her art and culture. Bengalees are imaginative and sensitive. Combination of various ideas and cultures have made them liberal. Populist ideas and communicative cults had its stronghold in Bengal, e. g. the *Sahajiya Vaishnava Cult*, *Dayabhaga* and *Stridhan Binyas* system propounded by Raghunandan, emergence of liberal religious figures like Chaitanya, Rama-krishna, popularity of *bauls*, etc.

Bengal's exposure to western ideas and culture brought forth different result for the Imperialists. British education and rule of law were introduced first in Bengal to build up the imperialist networks. True to its tradition of non-conformism, Bengal took up the leadership of anti-British revolts. The social reform movement symbolised in nineteenth century renaissance actually formed the base of Bengalee nationalism. All these activities were spearheaded by the middle class *bhadraloks* whom the British rulers wanted to be a buffer class. Being conscious of their social role, the *bhadraloks* formed a world view and value system different from other middle classes in the country. Sense of *Kaulinya* (aristocracy) to be achieved through education, achievements in non-manual professions, sensitive fondness for art and literature, apathy towards commercial activities, westernised thinking etc. compose *bhadralok's* value system.

This sense of *kaulinya* and lucrative return from investment in land just after the permanent settlement, might have influenced the Bengalee merchants, middlemen to become *zamindars*. Islam⁸ held that status, rather than wealth motivated the merchants to invest in land. Sinha, Kling give stress on

8. Sirajul Islam : *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal : a study of its operation (1790-1819)* Dhaka, 1979.

Also see N. K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol. 3. Calcutta, 1970.

B. B. Kling, *Partners in Empire, : Dwarknath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1980.

socio-cultural factors as commitments to joint family, religious rites etc. leading to entrepreneurship gap. However, the process of conversion of Bengalee merchants into landlords, has been exaggerated.⁹ Rather, we've the instance of a contrary process in Kasimbazar Raj family holding sway in collieries, glass, sand silk, tin printing, banking industries during 18th and 19th century. Bengalees took the lead in establishing cotton mill, iron and steel, engineering industries.

The decline of Bengalee industries was an aftermath of anti-partition movement (1905), economic depression of 1920's and rise of Managing Agency system. Political lobby went against them, and the immigrant trading communities from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Sind, Punjab first got a foothold in collieries, then to other industries. The Congress leadership including Gandhi, following the footsteps of British rulers, extended patronage to these immigrant communities.

Regional Deadlock in Economy.

The hang-over of partition could hardly be neutralised through development efforts. As already mentioned, the developmental paradoxes got deeper in the economy of the State. Decline in conventional industries and lack of effort in modernising the productive forces led to this situation.

The downward trend has been a constant phenomenon in per capita income, index of industrial and agricultural production and index of per capita net output of the state. The basic indicators and index of industrial and agricultural production as given in the table show this downward move.

India and West Bengal : Basic Indicators

	India	West Bengal
Per capita net domestic product (1985-86)	Rs. 2595.60 (current)	Rs. 2812.76
	Rs. 797.70 (70-71)	Rs. 857.76
Index no. of total output (Base 70-71)	391.6	314.2

9. A. Kawai : *Landlords and Imperial Rule : Change in Bengal's Agrarian Society*, Tokyo, 1987.

India and West Bengal : Basic Indicators

	<i>India</i>	<i>West Bengal</i>
Literacy (1981)	36.23%	40.9%
% of Urban population (1981)	23.31	26.47
Per capita consumption of Energy (1980)	130.48 kw	114.28 kw
Per capita Income (1985- 86) at 70-71 prices	798.00	857.76
% Increase in Index No. of in- dustrial production (85-86)	6.18	5.91
Rate of population growth% (77-81)	25.00	23.17

Source : *Economic Review* (1986-87), West Bengal.

Index Number of Industrial Production

(Base 1970 = 100)

	1977	1981	1983	1984	1985	1986 (Sept.)
W. Bengal	121.9	120.4	120.8	116.8	123.7	117.5
India	138.3	164.6	181.2	194.2	206.2	217.2

Source : Bureau of Applied Economics & Statistics
as quoted in *Ibid*

Index number of Agricultural Production in West Bengal

1971-1972 = 100

75-76	78-79	80-81	82-83	84-85	85-86
114.65	119.57	112.25	96.14	140.72	143.93

Source : *Economic Review*, op.cit. p.37.

The main pillars of West Bengal industrial structure, viz. Coal, Jute, Engineering have been eroded for reasons beyond the control of the State. The international market for jute has been constricted due to competition, invention of substitutes, rising cost of production and constant selling price, non-availability of quality raw jute pose problems. Every one out of four in West Bengal was supposed to make a living from this industry that used to earn half of India's foreign exchange.

Of the other main industries, Engineering occupies an important position in State's economy. West Bengal has been the pioneer in this sector. This industry used to meet up the internal as well as the demands of the export market. Wagon building has remained a major feeder to small and medium scale engineering units. The main wagon manufacturing public sector units such as Burn Standard, Jeshop, Braithwaite, Texmaco have the capacity to supply 1,00,000 wagons a year. Due to Railway Ministry's constant failure in keeping promise of stipulated order, the above concerns have to cut down production and resort to retrenchment. In spite of the united demand of West Bengal M. P's to the Railway Minister to ensure the present level order of 42,000 a year, the concerned Minister held that the order reduction to 5000 seems unavoidable.¹⁰

The oft-repeated allegation by the industrialists and the business community about labour unrest and political instability as being the causal factors of state's industrial sickness are mere alibis. During 1972-77, there had been one party rule at the Centre and West Bengal, without any threat of gherao or probable downfall of the government, the industrial pace underwent a backward move. So far political stability and labour are concerned, the left front government, during 1977-87, could offer a positive situation for the industrialists.

Following the tradition of British imperialists, the Indian capitalists and business community have turned this state into a hunting ground of maximum exploitation and transfer of resources. They do not have any stake in the State's development. The expansion of Birla, Tata, Thapar, Jain, Goenka business empires as exposed in figures of rocketting capital accumulation of these houses, could be possible at the cost of this resource hinterland of Bengal. Capitalists in industrialised nations could prosper through exploiting the cheap raw resources (including labour) of the under developed countries. In a similar way, the outsider business community in West

10. *Statesman*, May 9, 1985.

Bengal could expand their empires through exploiting this industrial base, i.e. West Bengal. As prof. N. K. Bose, the noted Anthropologist and one time secretary of Mahatma Gandhi held, this outsider business community in Bengal has always created their own compartment of socio-cultural exchanges. They never appreciate or communicate with the life activities of local population (Calcutta—A Social Survey). Hence their total non-involvement and apathy towards State's development.

The deadlock in State's development has been precipitated by this asocial approach, combined with centre's apathy towards eastern region as a whole. This has been revealed in the allotment of resources to these states in comparison with western and northern region states, both by the financial institutions and the Central Government departments. Licensing policy, bias of L.I.C. IDBI, Banks in credit policy also speaks of a similar trend. In the case of distribution of deposits and advances of Scheduled Banks, West Bengal got advances of 50.3% to her deposits, Bihar 34.8%, whereas Maharashtra, Haryana, Karnataka received 85.1%, 68.3% and 87.6%. The percentage of L.I.C.'s investment in relation to the total investment stand at 7.78 in West Bengal, 3.48 in Orissa, 5.62 in Bihar during 1984. The figure in Maharashtra stood at 14.90. Gujarat 9.93. Zonally it remained at 19.69 in Eastern Zone, 24.52 in Southern Zone, 24.96 in Western Zone.¹¹ The statewise figures in per capita assistance provided by all financial institutions reveal the same anti-federal attitude of the centre.

11. *Economic Review* : 1986-87, Govt. of W. Bengal, p. 148, 161.

**Sanctions by All India Financial Institutions
during 1980-84 (Rs. Crores)**

Period	Sanctions		Share of West Bengal to All India
	All India	West Bengal	
1980-81	2309.70	106.6	4.6
1981-82	2793.75	180.43	6.5
1982-83	3181.34	209.56	6.6
1983-84	3994.53	222.89	5.6
Total	20455.44	1390.62	6.8

Source : IDBI operational statistics, 1983-84 as quoted in *A Review of the Industrial Scene in West Bengal*, 1984-85. Annexure XI Commerce & Industrial Deptt. Govt. of West Bengal.

The state's economic decline has been precipitated by problems of technological renovation in conventional industries and Calcutta Port. Due to diversion of its flow, the Hooghly river has been subject to increased siltation leading to rising cost in dredging and deteriorating draft condition of the port. Backdated technology and production method in some conventional industries have failed to revitalise those industries. Howrah's engineering workshops, or the old chemical factories would illustrate this trend.

The overall dismal picture of the state economy has been symbolised in the crisis of Calcutta, the lifespring of the State. Unlike any other state, Calcutta remains the epicentre of development, decline, crisis and woes of the State's life. Its chronic deficit in amenities as water, drainage, transport, power, health, and education facilities go unabated. The piecemeal adhoc measures of the authorities could hardly minimise the crisis. However, state's socio-economic life continues to have the main stake in Calcutta. Hence its decline is mirrored in the overall decadance of the state, and vice-versa.

The Political Complexion

Every nation or state has its own orientation in institution building. The Indian polity, in the modern sense of the term, came up only with the establishment of British Raj. However, the Moghul administrative and revenue networks were quite extensive, but the modern state institution building started with British rulers' effort to stabilise their empire. Bengal was the starting point in that effort. At the initial stages, the upcoming Bengalee bhadraloks stood by the side of the British in this effort. For the sake of modernisation and disgust against the chaotic muslim rulers, they preferred British rule as an opening for participation and expansion.

Long before Gandhi's memorable call for Swaraj and Satyagraha, the concept of *Swadeshikata* (nationalism) and *Swadeshi Sumaj* found expression in *Swadeshi Mela* and *Silpa* (Industry), where home made commodities were exhibited. Hence, the Bengalees may feel quite justified to be sensitive about their role and contribution, which subsequently have been minimised by all India Congress leaders.

From the very outset of national movement, bhadraloks could create some impact on the national mind through their heroic activities against the British rulers. Before the emergence of Gandhi, Congress remained a platform of negotiation and well intentioned demands for reform. Tilak and his supporters tried to infuse some militant anti-British vigour in Congress, but they were made to leave Congress. Freedom fighters in Bengal stood behind Tilak's stand. But Congress could hardly be transformed into a militant anti-imperialist struggle. For some time, during the absense of extremists, Congress remained dormant (1907-15). The moderate leaders were not responsive to people's aspirations for struggle.

The Congress leadership and policy as such, even under Gandhi on some occasions, could hardly appreciate the urge of the people for movement and taking up militant stand against the British. The revolutionary groups and cadres, even when they worked with Congress temporarily, never felt one with

Congress' conciliatory attitude. They embraced Tilak, Aurobindo and Subhas as their leader rather than Gandhi and Nehru. This source of Bengalee alienation from Congress was completed with the famous fight between Gandhi-Subhas leading to ouster of Subhas from Congress, and subsequently Congress leadership's questionable role in accepting partition of the country.

Bengalee nationalism as such had its components of violence, rooted in religious trends, and non-conformist revivalism which were prevalent during the second half of the 19th century and first two decades of this century. It was the Bengalee intellectual reformers who projected the idea of an Indian polity. India as a political community was in one sense their discovery. Initially, they aspired for a new integrated cultural identity, and tried to create a new basis for politics. This actually gave rise to ambivalence of modernity and revival, i.e. search for identity through revitalising traditional symbols of Indianness. But that was not to be, rather this ambivalence gave rise to compartmentalised identity seeking for a consistent self. As Nandy said, "this attempt to alter the Indian's cultural self soon created an inward looking defensiveness, an effort to protect self-esteem, and a controversy to which the Indian political identity could be redefined without full scale westernisation".¹²

Bengalee aversion to Congress politics and Gandhi also, has its origin in this trend. Bengal could not be convinced of the efficacy of Congress' soft approach in anti-British struggles. Even when the revolutionary groups after being sandwiched by Police oppression and Gandhi's effective method of popular mobilisation, decided to merge or work from within the Congress, they were far from being converted votaries of non-violence. Some groups as *Anushilan*, *Bengal Volunteers*, Bepin Ganguly's group considered this as a strategy to gain organisational hold in Congress, others were intent on making

12. Ashis Nandy : *At the Edge of Psychology*, P 52-53.
OUP, 1980.

it a source platform for future base and mobilisation. But such attempts were foiled due to various factors. During 1930's, sweeping ideological feuds got hold over those revolutionary groups. A section of Jugantar and Anushilan became Marxists to join the C.P.I, some others joined Congress, Congress Socialist Party or formed new Marxist parties. However the feuds and debates on different versions of Marxism and Leninism for that matter continued. And this confusing trend has been extended to post-independence politics and parties in West Bengal.

The post-independent Bengal, loaded with the nightmarish experiences of Hindu-Muslim riots and partition, could never forgive the Congress leadership for their past role. The Gandhite Congress leadership who ascended to power, followed the faction-based politics of the past, they were soon exposed to crisis. Seven months old cabinet had to be changed due to factional quarrels based on district grouping and East Bengal West Bengal (*Bangal-Ghati*) animosity. Dr. B. C. Roy came in to succeed Dr. P. C. Ghosh, an associate of Gandhi and leader of Khadi Group. He was ousted in a united move of Midnapore-Hooghly group and Jugantar revolutionaries in the Congress. The issue of Gandhi's insistence on including a marwari minister was also there. Dr. Roy piloted Congress to electoral victory and offered stable ministry. His pragmatic approach for state's economic rejuvenation gained legitimacy. But he had his failures too, which has led this state to decline. He was less concerned about rural development (see Atulya Ghosh, *Kistakolpita*), didn't take measures to revitalise cottage and small scale industries. In 1959, State Bank sanctioned Rs. 43 Crores to 1060 small scale units, West Bengal got only Rs. 9 lakhs. Whereas Birla, Sreeram Goenkas grew in a big way. The Marwari industrialists were given the intent of setting up car, biscuit, fan, sewing machine, soap etc. major industries during his regime.¹³

13. D. Burman : *Bangla O' Bangalee*, p 30, Calcutta, 1962.

In the political front, Dr. Roy was never an organisational man. After some period of his tenure, in 1957 he enforced an understanding with Mr. Atulya Ghosh, who never left a straw to put pressure on him. Mr. Ghosh's organisational monopoly in the Congress helped to build up a base of Congress groups down to the village level. The selected men were made to be the power holders and linkage in the corridor of power. These linkmen never served the poor, rather the governmental grants and facilities were pocketed by them. Thus they became the symbol of corruption, status quoism and vested interest. Naturally, age long deprivation, negligence, ill treatment to the poors gave handle to communist and other opposition forces. Moreover, the refugee habitations and their problems, occasional food scarcity often led to violent agitations. The Communists who could make little headway through *tevaga* movement (1948) in some pockets, were later successful in exploiting the popular discontent against Congress. During 1950's violent outburst of popular discontent took place in the form of movement against one paise rise of Tram fare (1953), Teachers' movement (1954), Food movements (1959), (1966) and anti-merger movement (1960). The Congress' legitimacy had been so eroded that large scale violence, setting fire on state property and house of ministers, disrupting normal life and likely activities perpetrated by the communists and other allied forces got the support of middle class people. As such, violence became a factor in democratic politics of West Bengal. The C.P.I and other left parties which have common antecedent to pre-independence revolutionary groups, found justification in asserting their militant posture through such actions.

However, all such actions and movements more or less took place in urban areas of greater Calcutta and mofussil towns. On the other hand, Congress could extend its base in rural areas through governmental machinery thus building up a vote bank. Divisiveness and factional existence of so many

splinter parties contributed to stabilise this vote bank of Congress. For example, in 1952 general election, the Communist led front USOI (United Socialist Organisation of India) was composed of CPI, RSP and some splinter Marxist groups, in 1957 ULEC with C.P.I, R.S.P, F. Bloc raised their strength in the Assembly from 43 to 80. In 1952, P.S.P opted out of the CPI-led front ULF which secured 72 seats. During this period, following the all India pattern, Congress could secure maximum seats in the State Assembly with 40% of polled votes in its favour. It was evident from the voting trend that unless the Communists could forge electoral alliance with nationalist parties like F. bloc, R.S.P, P.S.P, they would never be able to improve strength. Being fully conscious of this weakness, CPI always tried to make electoral front even with die-hard anti-Communist nationalist forces like P.S.P, F. Bloc and later with Bangla Congress. Whereas, the anti-CPI forces, though sometimes led important popular movements (e.g. movements for refugee rehabilitation and demands for relief-dole etc., teachers or food movement) they could never draw a consistent strategy regarding electoral front with the Communists. As a result, C.P.I was tactful enough to exploit the legacy of anti-Congress mass movements. For example, after the success of anti-merger movement, launched unitedly by all anti-Congress parties, P.S.P decided to contest the 1962 election all of its own due to the pressure of party's pro-American all India lobby led by Ashoke Mehta and backed by Subhasist group in W. Bengal. Again in 1967 election, P.S.P maintained its anti-Communist stand, though on the eve of election the party made local arrangements with CPI-led PULF parties as against the CPI(M) led ULF. Soon after the formation of UF ministry in 1967, P.S.P got split on the issue of joining the Communist-led ministry. Thus, instead of combatting the Communists or checking their expanding influence, P.S.P's strategy led to its own split and erosion. The case of F. Bloc is more devastating. Their docile pragmatism in combining Marxism with Subhasism led to various splits and subsequent appendaging.

to the communists. Since 1949, as a major section of it declared to be Marxists, led the party to a dependent situation. The undivided CPI, CPI(M) have utilised them in electoral games. During 1967-71, F. Bloc joined in CPI's game to isolate CPI(M), CPI(M)'s aggrandizing policy also forced them to get aligned with CPI and form Eight Party Combination (EPC) led by CPI to fight 1971 election. In that election, F. Bloc's strength got reduced from 21 (1969) to 3 (1971), then to nil in 1972. The position of parties like R.S.P, S.S.P also depended on alignment pattern in elections.

The figures indicate the growing average of votes secured by the communists. However, the percentage factors do not show any clear trend. The higher percentage may be due to larger number of contested seats. In 1967, Congress secured 127 seats with 40% of votes, in 1969 got only 55 seats with 41% of votes, in 1971 secured 105 seats with 28.20% of votes. The same has been the case with CPI(M). In 1969 they got 80 seats with 20% of votes, in 1972 with 27% they could win in 14 seats only.

Hence, it is the alignment pattern and political swing that decide. In 1969, the united image of the UF and popular disgust against Congress' undemocratic activities helped the communists to hold the sway. Whereas in 1972, CPI's adjustment with Congress (R) changed the milieu of the electoral canvas, with the same percentage of votes in 71 and 72 (8%) CPI increased its strength from 13 to 35 in 1972.

In fact, the strength of opposition politics did extend in and around greater Calcutta industrial area and refugee populated areas in 24-Parganas to Nadia, viz. from Budge Budge to Krishnanagar, and from East Calcutta to Asansole. The frightening effects of partition were felt in the industrial network in this belt with the historic background of labour struggle and freedom movement contributing to Communists' breakthrough in these areas. A look-through into the district-wise composition would reveal this. In 1969 and 1971 elections, CPI(M) could secure only 2 and 7 seats in the six

North Bengal Districts, whereas Congress secured 27 and 42 seats in 1969 and 71. In 1972 also, the trend was similar.

Districtwise Breakdown of Seats Won

	Cooch behar	Jalpai guri	Darjee.	W. Dinajpur	Murshida- Malda	bad
CPI(M) 1969	0	0	0	2	0	0
1971	0	1	1	0	2	3
1972	0	0	0	0	0	1
Congress '69	6	7	1	3	5	5
'71	7	9	2	11	5	8
'72	8	9	3	11	8	13

Source : Sajal Basu : *West Bengal-The Violent Years*, p.75
Prachi, 1974.

In Calcutta and nearby districts covered by industrial networks, viz. 24-Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Nadia, the electoral scene was different. In these districts, Congress could bag only 17 seats in 1969 (n=119) and 38 in 1971. CPI(M) and its allies got 90 in 1969, 60 in 1971.

	Nadia	24-Pgs.	Cal.	How.	Hoog.
CPI(M) 1969	2	24	8	8	9
1971	9	24	5	12	10
1972	0	7	0	2	2
Cong. '69	5	4	5	1	2
'71	1	14	16	3	4
'72	11	35	21	11	12

Source : *Ibid.*

In 1969, CPI as a front ally could secure 13 in these districts. In 1971 as a constituent of E.P.C. CPI got only 3. In 1972 as an ally of Congress (R) it could increase its strength to 10.

The Fluid Bases

The Congress' resurgence in 1972, especially in the districts of Burdwan, 24-Parganas, Calcutta should not be taken as

stable. In 1977, the whole spectrum changed, and in the post 77 elections, CPI (M) could extend its rural vote-base in traditional strongholds of Congress. For instance, in the North Bengal districts and Midnapore, Birbhum, Bankura, CPI (M) secured considerable majority. In fact, erosion of Congress bases in rural areas started in 1965-66 as an after-effect of P. C. Sen ministry's wrong policy and split in the Congress. The demise of Dr. B. C. Roy (1964) and split in State Congress actually disrupted the power balance. Due to Dr. Roy's towering personality, factional feuds in the Congress did not have any impact on administration and stability. The rivalry between Hooghly group and Midnapore group and subsequently irresponsible behaviour of Sri Sen as a Chief Minister widened the legitimacy gap of the ruling party. As an aftermath of Sri Sen's food policy, milk control rule, the middle class peasants and rural powerholders got dissociated from Congress. A major section in the districts of Midnapore, part of 24-Parganas rallied behind Bangla Congress. Actually, that was the beginning of a change in alignment pattern of rural gentry.

Before 1967, most of the movements against the Congress Government were sporadic and limited in the periphery of greater Calcutta areas. The violent agitations in these areas in the form of militant demonstration, setting fire on public vehicles etc, didn't have much impact on the rural population that remained the base for Congress upto 1969. The disbalance in Congress power structure, both at the centre and state completed the process of erosion. Besides, the role of state Congress leadership in dismantling the U. F. Government through a conspiracy in which even the Governor was involved,¹⁴ further isolated the Congress from the people. Subsequently, when the hatched plan of October 2, 1967 did not work out due to hesitation of Congress leadership to fulfill Ajoy Mukherjee's condition for reorganising the State Congress, 'Dr. P. C. Ghosh took up the cudgel against U. F government in November. He

14. *Memoires of a Civil Servant*, Dharam Vira, p. 107-31. Vikas, 1975.

formed a minority ministry with the help of some defector M.L.A's and support of Congress. The infantilism of this move was readily given a lesson in mid-term election of 1969, the reunified United Front secured a massive majority. However, if we analyse the voting trend we will see that fluidity in support had remained inspite of different parties' claim to the contrary. In 1972 and 77 elections for example, we could see the evidence of such shifting trends. Indeed, it is true that the CPI(M) has been able to extend its rural base during post-1967 period. But that does not prove that the extended bases are stable, at least so far the popular voting pattern is concerned. During the violent years of 1969-71, CPI(M) leaders could boast of building up of invincible red forts in some urban and rural pockets of greater Calcutta and Burdwan. But as police repression and Congress-Police backed *mastans* were let loose, CPI(M) cadres including some leaders had to leave their *para* (locality) residences to save their skin. The leadership made open statement that 20,000 cadres had been displaced. Sri Jyoti Basu, besides complaining about Congress-Police joint murder actions against CPI(M), officially lodged complaints to the Chief Election Commissioner about 34 constituencies where CPI(M) cadres were not allowed to campaign on the eve of 1972 election.¹⁵ In 1972 election, whatever charges of rigging had been there, the people in West Bengal gave a positive verdict against the aggrandizing terroristic policy of CPI(M). In 85 constituencies, CPI(M) lagged behind by 10-15 thousand votes, in 32 constituencies the difference was 10-12 thousand, in 10 constituencies only, the difference was 40 thousand, i. e. abnormal or rigged difference. And it is to be noted that rigging and forceful capture of booths by Congress *mastans* took place in Calcutta, 24-Parganas, Burdwan, the strongholds of CPI(M) and where CPI(M) also organised widescale rigging in 1971. As Soumendra

15. For detail See Basu : *Politics of Violence*, Minerva, p. 82.

Nath Tagore held 'teen aged boys and girls were registered as voters and cast their votes. Terrorisation of voters was rampant.'¹⁶ In 1972, Congress followed the counter-terroristic strategy to rout the CPI(M) from its traditional bases. In the whole district of Burdwan, in the industrial constituencies in and around Calcutta, i.e. from Dum Dum to Naihati covering 9 Constituencies, from Jadavpur to Budge Budge in the South 24-Paragans, this strategy was pursued. The short sighted less organised violence of the leftists had no alternative but to bow down to the well organised violence of the Establishment.

During 1972-77, the period of Assembly boycott and absconding, the CPI(M) and sister left parties, far from offering any resistance, failed to assert their existence as a political party. Even during Emergency (June 75-Feb. 77), the CPI(M) led ULF refused to organise any movement or propaganda against the emergency rule. Out of fear, the CPI(M) cadres could not work openly in '77 Lok Sabha election. Only with the installation of Janata Party Government, CPI(M) cadres demonstrated their courage by getting back to their respective *paras*. Their ascendance to power was also decided by some contingent factors. CPI(M) was agreed to fight the 1977 Assembly election jointly with Janata Party on the basis of 45-55% i. e. allotting 45% to CPI(M), 55% seats to Janata candidates. The talk actually failed due to P. C. Sen's quixotic behaviour.¹⁷

In 1977-78, during Janata rule, the left front government could mobilise support and extend rural bases through programmes like 'Food for Work', minimum agricultural wages and Barga operation. Though 'food for work' was the brain child of Janata and fund too was central, due to organised propaganda machinery and cadres, CPI(M) could convince the people that the whole thing was theirs. Barga operation

16. *Statesman*, March 18, 1971.

17. P. C. Chunder : *Power Corrupts even Marxists. The Week*. July 1-7, 84.

and enforcement of minimum agricultural wages were also nothing new. Mainly, these acts were enacted during Dr. B. C. Roy's and S. S. Roy's rule, the implications of the acts were worked out by the front government. On the eve of flood in 1978, the government and the parties could well utilise the relief funds and materials provided by the Central Government and aid agencies. In the industrial front too, the government could claim about its achievements as the number of closure, gherao, look-out, retrenchment etc. showed a declining trend from 1978-79. As a result, CPI(M) led front could combat the wave of Indira resurgence in 1980 Lok Sabha election, inspite of their opportunistic role in withdrawing support from the collapsing Janata party government in 1979.

In 1980 Lok Sabha election, CPI(M) led front's victory was more significant and possessive. In 1977, CPI(M) and its allies were neither confident nor sure of its victory as the stage was then dominated by Janata on whose good will and help CPI(M) could regain its lost credibility and foothold. So in 1980, CPI(M) front won in 264 Assembly Constituencies as compared with 231 in 1977. This has been possible due to 2½ years front rule and movement of the people. Besides, the left front government has taken up programmes in the interests of the weaker, toiling people and has tried to implement it, the election results signify this.¹⁸ All the additional 31 Assembly constituencies where front had margin over Cong (I), belong to Panchayat areas i.e. rural. In 10 Lok Sabha constituencies, margin of votes in favour of CPI(M) was more than 1 lakh. The most significant achievement to be noted is, in the rural strongholds of Congress viz. 5 districts in North Bengal, and in Midnapore, CPI(M) could procure more percentage of votes. In Bankura and Purulia also, CPI(M)'s gain was remarkable. But reality is more fallacious than arithmetic of voting figures which rarely could assess the voters' mind. 1969 could not be repeated in 1977, neither 1972 be repeated by Congress in

18. *Sameeksha* (7th Lok Sabha Election in West Bengal). CPI(M), p. 13, 1980.

1977. For CPI(M) too, 1980 could not be repeated in 1984. The alternative swings, as reflected in these elections, do not indicate any polarised trend, rather it bespeaks of a popular mood to teach a lesson to the rulers and cut them to size when required. And that is the greatest positive achievement of our democratic system.

The traditional leftist strongholds were soon to be eroded. As the state continued to be afflicted with sick economy, mere politicking of centre's discriminating policy failed to check the erosion set in into the CPI(M) bases. The states industrial and agricultural production increased marginally, the number of sick units mounted, power crisis became chronic. Apart from non-performances, unconcern and lack of intensive attempt to face the problems, actually led to loss of credibility for the front government. As has been noted earlier, disillusionment among the bhadraloks, the pace setter of popular opinion, about the sincerity of purpose of the left front government and the parties, would lead to subsequent erosion of support. The power shortage stands at 450 mw, likely to reach a shortfall of 1011 mw in 1989-90.¹⁹ Unemployment continues to swell year by year, reaching 14 lakhs in 1983, Investment situation remains dormant as ever. In their political posture and professions too, the front leaders have proved to be more confused and inconsistent. Per capita income came down from Rs. 761 (1978-79) to Rs. 690 in 82-83, birth rate gone up from 34.2 (1977) to 35.4 (1981), total domestic industrial product eroded from Rs. 4030 crores in 77-78 to Rs. 3885 cr. in 82-83²⁰. Differences and feuds among constituent party ministers and leaders have been open, often leading to childish rabble rousing.

Hence erosion of support and loss of credibility were soon to be exposed. A CPI(M) estimate says, in the 1982 Assembly poll, the left front secured more than 50% of votes in 206

19. Sankar Roy : *More Downs than UPS*, *The Herald Review*, April 4, 1985.

20. *The Week*, 1-7 July, 1984.

Assembly Constituencies, and the anti-front votes of Cong (I), Janata, B.J.P. etc. could have more than 50% of votes only in 49 constituencies. In 42 constituencies, front candidates got more than 60% of votes polled. CPI(M) assessed 1982 results as a positive mandate and it is clear that in the industrial belt leftists still hold the sway, out of 30 it could win in 24 industrial constituencies of Calcutta, 24-Parganas, Hooghly and Howrah.²¹

District	Front :			Cong (I) : Seats Won		
	1982	1984	1987	1982	1984	1987
Coochbehar (N=9)	9	8	9	0	1	0
Jalpaiguri(12)	12	10	11	0	2	1
Darjeeling(5)	4	3	5	+1 (Supp)	1	0
W. Dinajpur(12)	6	6	12	4+2	6	0
Malda (11)	5	5	10	6	6	1
Murshidabad (19)	12	13	15	7	6	4
Nadia (15)	15	10	14	0	5	1
24-Parganas (55)	48	32	47	5	22	7
Calcutta(22)	11	0	9	11	22	13
Howrah (16)	13	8	11	3	8	5
Hooghly (19)	15	9	18	4	10	1
Midnapore(37)	32	24	35	4+1	8	2
Purulia (11)	8	7	11	2+1	4	0
Bankura (13)	12	11	13	1	2	0
Burdwan (26)	26	18	23	0	8	3
Birbhum (12)	10	8	10	2	4	2
	238	177	253	49+5	115	40

Source : *Paryalochana*. p. 18. *West Bengal*, 27 March, 87.

The Lok Sabha election, 1984 showed a contrary swing in these industrial areas. Not only that Congress could win in 115 Assembly Constituencies, they could bag all the seats of

21. *Paryalochana* : 1982 Assembly Election, p. 9-10. CPI(M) '82.

Calcutta, 50% of Howrah, Hooghly, 41% of 24-parganas seats. The traditional bases as Jadavpur, Dum Dum, Barrackpore, Serampore, Howrah, Asansole and Calcutta have been routed. Districtwise figures of 82 and 84 elections in terms of Assembly areas, would be self-revealing.

Far from realising the factors behind erosion, CPI(M) leaders stick to complacency and rabble rousing. As an official account says: In spite of factionalism, feuds, Congress (I) get 40% vote. We deem it to be very serious. Rich men, vested interest groups will stand behind Congress. But a significant number of poor, peasants, workers, middle class vote for congress.²² This attitude has remained a constant phenomenon with the CPI(M) leadership, down to the grass-roots. In 1980, after reverses in Panchayat election in Burdwan, Zilla Parishad Chairman of CPI(M) said, 'the alleged corruption and nepotism had nothing to do with the election results'²³ But Forward Bloc had resolved that Front has failed to improve administrative work, constituents did not follow any code of conduct, it has failed even to explain the factors responsible for non-implementation of development works. C.P.I also evaluates on the same line.²⁴ Moreover, the CPI(M) led government has proved unequal to the task of catching up with the popular emotions. Any and every elected government would be taken as failure if it lacks in showing sincere eagerness to meet the problems. Every government is a failure in keeping pace with aspirations of the people. But this eagerness and prompt response to popular grievances repair the legitimacy gap created by rising expectations. CPI(M) led government lacks this quality of eagerness.

The popular reaffirmation in 1987 election for the left front should not be considered as due to success in policy implementations. The sentiment roused by Gorkhaland,

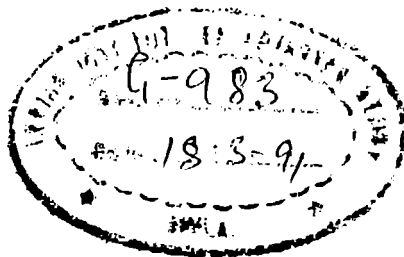
22. Ibid. p. 9.

23. *Statesman*, Aug 2, 90

24. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 22.1.85.

Congress leaders' high brow attitude to Beagal's popular mood, and brickbating in Cong. (I) led the people to withdraw all support from it. In spite of all these, the non-existent Cong (I) could secure 41.81% votes, a lead over CPI(M)'s 39.29%.

The politics and economy of the state, as it stand now, do not seem to have any sign of recovery or change. The traditional leftists, having tasted power are far from offering any viable position for the state. Their terrorist legacy being transitioned to Marxist radicalism in a traditional framework, lack any perspective of changing ideology and developmental pre-requisites. Their lip service to radicalism has no relevance to contemporary problems of this state and crisis in institutions. The conservative forces, headed by Congress, on the other hand, do not have any sense of institution reforming and development requirements. They contribute to erosion of the democratic institutions, on which they stand. Hence, there is little chance of immediate recovery, politically and economically.



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