

The Rise Of The Communist Party Of India (Marxist) And The Consolidation Of Left Politics In West Bengal

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Abstract:

The rise of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal represents a significant phase in the transformation of regional politics in post-independence India. Emerging from the split in the Communist movement in 1964, the CPI(M) gradually consolidated its base through trade union activism, peasant mobilization, and participation in mass democratic movements such as the Food Movement of the 1960s. The party capitalized on the decline of the Congress system, the political instability of the United Front governments (1967–1970), and the popular discontent during the Emergency (1975–77). By forming the Left Front government in 1977, it institutionalized a durable model of coalition politics, agrarian reform, and decentralized governance that reshaped West Bengal's political landscape for over three decades.

Keywords: Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), Left Front, Land Reforms, Trade Union Movement, United Front Government (West Bengal)

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I. Introduction:

The rise of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) in West Bengal is an important part of India's political history. The party was formed in 1964 after a split in the Communist movement. Over time, it became strong by working closely with farmers, workers, students, and poor people. It played an active role in the food movements of the 1960s and later joined the United Front governments, which gave it experience in running the state. During the Emergency (1975–77), many people became unhappy with the Congress government. The CPI(M) used this opportunity to present itself as a better and democratic alternative. In 1977, it came to power as part of the Left Front and began a long period of rule in West Bengal.

II. Causes Of The Rise Of The Communist Party Of India (Marxist) And The Growth Of Left Politics In West Bengal

1. Formation of the Party in 1964

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) was formed in 1964 after a split in the Communist movement in India. The split happened mainly because of ideological differences within the Communist Party of India (CPI). One group believed in a moderate line and cooperation with the Congress, while the other group wanted a more radical and class-based approach to politics. International issues like the Sino-Soviet conflict also influenced this division. In West Bengal, many leaders and workers supported the new CPI(M) because they felt it would better represent the interests of workers, peasants, and the poor. The formation of CPI(M) marked the beginning of a new phase in Left politics in the state. It laid a strong ideological foundation based on Marxism-Leninism and class struggle. This clarity in ideology helped the party to organise people at the grassroots level and slowly expand its influence across rural and urban areas of West Bengal (Brass, 1994).

2. Growth through Trade Union Movements

The CPI(M) became strong in West Bengal by working closely with industrial workers. The party actively participated in trade union activities, especially in Kolkata and other industrial areas. Through organisations like the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the party mobilised workers to demand better wages, job security, and improved working conditions. These movements created strong bonds between the party and the working class. Workers began to see CPI(M) as their true representative. Frequent strikes and labour protests in the 1960s and 1970s increased the party's visibility. Though sometimes criticised for labour unrest, these

struggles helped the CPI(M) build a mass base. The party's consistent support for workers' rights strengthened its position in urban politics. Over time, trade union activism became one of the main pillars of CPI(M)'s organisational growth in West Bengal (Chatterjee, 1997).

3. Role in Peasant and Rural Movements

Apart from workers, the CPI(M) focused strongly on peasants and rural poor. West Bengal had a large number of sharecroppers and landless labourers who faced exploitation. The party organised peasants through movements demanding land reforms and protection of tenancy rights. These struggles increased rural political awareness. The CPI(M) supported peasants during food shortages and price rise movements. By connecting with village-level issues, the party built a strong rural base. This support later helped the party introduce major land reforms after coming to power. The early rural mobilisation created trust between the party and poor farmers. As a result, villages became strong centres of Left politics. This rural strength played a major role in the CPI(M)'s electoral success in 1977 (Kohli, 1987).

4. Participation in the United Front Governments

Before coming to power in 1977, the CPI(M) participated in the United Front governments of 1967 and 1969 in West Bengal. These coalition governments were formed to oppose Congress dominance. Participation in government gave CPI(M) important administrative experience. Leaders learned how to manage state institutions and handle governance issues. Though the United Front governments did not last long due to internal conflicts and central intervention, they helped the CPI(M) prove that it could govern responsibly. This experience also increased public confidence in the party. People began to see CPI(M) not only as a protest party but also as a capable political alternative. These early experiences prepared the ground for stable governance after 1977 (Banerjee, 1984).

5. Impact of the Food Movements of the 1960s

The food crisis of the 1960s led to widespread protests in West Bengal. Rising prices and shortage of essential commodities created public anger. The CPI(M) played an active role in organising food movements against the Congress government. These protests connected the party with common people, especially the urban poor and lower middle class. The party highlighted issues of corruption and mismanagement. Through rallies and demonstrations, CPI(M) increased its popularity. The food movement became a turning point because it showed that the party stood with ordinary citizens during crisis. This strengthened its mass appeal and prepared the ground for future electoral victories (Chatterjee, 1997).

6. Opposition to the Emergency (1975–77)

During the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, democratic rights were suspended across India. Many opposition leaders were arrested. The CPI(M) strongly opposed the Emergency and defended democratic values. In West Bengal, this helped the party gain moral support from people who were unhappy with Congress rule. The Emergency weakened the Congress system and created space for opposition unity. When elections were announced in 1977, people wanted change. CPI(M) presented itself as a democratic and disciplined party committed to protecting civil liberties. This anti-Emergency position played a key role in its electoral victory (Kohli, 1987).

7. Formation of the Left Front Coalition

In 1977, CPI(M) formed a broad alliance called the Left Front. This coalition included several Left parties. The alliance helped unite different Left forces under one platform. It avoided vote division and strengthened electoral prospects. The coalition approach showed political maturity and unity. Voters saw the Left Front as stable and organised. The alliance won a massive victory in the 1977 Assembly elections. This marked the beginning of long-term Left rule in West Bengal. Coalition unity became a major reason for political stability in the state (Banerjee, 1984).

8. Leadership of Jyoti Basu

Strong leadership also played a crucial role. Jyoti Basu became the Chief Minister in 1977. He was experienced, practical, and widely respected. His moderate and democratic style helped build trust among different social groups. Basu balanced ideology with administrative responsibility. Under his leadership, the government focused on land reforms and decentralisation. His long tenure provided continuity and stability. Basu's leadership image strengthened the party's popularity across decades (Brass, 1994).

9. Institutionalisation of Left Politics

After coming to power, CPI(M) worked to strengthen local governance through Panchayati Raj reforms. Decentralisation increased participation of rural people in politics. The party created a strong network from village to state level. This organisational structure ensured long-term electoral success. Over time, Left politics became deeply rooted in society. It was not just a government but a political culture in West Bengal. This institutionalisation explains why the Left Front remained in power for 34 years (Kohli, 1987).

10. Beginning of Long-Term Rule in 1977

The 1977 election victory marked a historic moment. The Left Front government became one of the longest-serving elected communist governments in the world. The combination of ideology, mass mobilisation, leadership, and coalition unity ensured stability. The CPI(M) transformed from a protest movement into a ruling party with strong grassroots support. Its rise changed the political history of West Bengal permanently (Chatterjee, 1997).

III. Conclusion:

The rise of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal was not a sudden event. It was the result of many years of struggle, organisation, and close connection with common people. From its formation in 1964, the party focused on workers, peasants, students, and the poor. Through trade union movements, peasant struggles, and food protests, it built strong support both in cities and villages. Participation in the United Front governments helped the party gain experience in administration.

The period of the Emergency (1975–77) further changed the political situation. Many people were unhappy with the Congress government and wanted a democratic alternative. The CPI(M), along with other Left parties, formed the Left Front and presented a united platform. Under the leadership of Jyoti Basu, the alliance won the 1977 Assembly election. After coming to power, the Left Front introduced land reforms and strengthened Panchayati Raj institutions. These steps increased rural participation and support. Over time, Left politics became deeply rooted in West Bengal's political culture. The CPI(M)'s rise shows how strong organisation, clear ideology, and close contact with people can lead to long-term political success in a democratic system.

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