Exploring
MARXIST BENGAL
c.1971-2011

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Memory, History and Irony

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For
Samaresh Bhattacharya
Rina Bhattacharya
and
Kabita Sengupta

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Acknowledgements

This is a difficult task. Perhaps I should start by acknowledging my debt to a certain situation which has played an important role behind this book. Life offers strange twists and turns which are difficult to predict. It so happened that in 2000 a student of History started working in the development sector of West Bengal, India instead of the more usual jobs meant for such students. A student of urban History landed in the middle of rural Bengal thanks to certain impractical decisions. That led to a series of experiences in the field as well as in terms of reading which made me interested in contemporary West Bengal. After my first book came out in 2008, I thought of writing something on the West Bengal I have seen in four decades of my life but wasn't quite sure how to go about it.

I was not located within the academe and therefore had the freedom to experiment with form and content without bothering as to whether this is going to damage my career or not; whether the academic honchos would approve of it or not. This was a nocturnal activity and an excuse to remain unsocial. As the book evolved it developed two aspects – first, an attempt to understand the Left experience in West Bengal, and second, an experiment with the narrative form by putting the narrator inside the narrative. After several drafts, the book finally began to take shape after 2011 and was completed in 2014. I am lucky that this experiment found a publisher. It has been a wonderful experience to work with them.

I owe enormous debt to my parents and family members for coping with my tantrums all my life and to my teachers for installing inside me the capacity to keep learning. It will be a futile exercise to acknowledge each of my teachers individually. A large number of writers whose work I have managed to read, fully or partly, correctly and incorrectly, have shaped my thoughts and imagination. It is

impossible to name all them but let me acknowledge my debt to them.

Some passages from this book, before it became a book, were shared via Facebook in 2011. These "notes" surprisingly received wide attention and my thoughts as well as my confidence were enriched by the "likes" and comments that I received. Again, I cannot thank each of the readers individually but would like to express my sincere gratitude to all of them.

Since a large part of this book has to do with rural Bengal, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Dr. Sujit Sinha, Shri Tirthankar Mukherjee, Shri Dilip Ghosh, Shri Dilip Pal, Dr. Ajay Bhattacharya, Shri Dilip Chakrabarti and Shri Buddhadeb Ghosh for helping me to understand rural Bengal. Dr. George Mathew gave me the opportunity to work on panchayati raj at the national level, travel around India and see rural India with my own eyes. I thank him for this opportunity. I would also like to pay respect here to late Professor B.S. Baviskar who took great interest in whatever I wrote. My friends and colleagues in different organisations that I have worked in since 2000 – Uthnau, Swanirvar, Groupe Développement, Panchayat Department of Government of West Bengal and Institute of Social Sciences have taught me many things that have directly or indirectly gone into this book. I thank them all. There is simply not enough space to name all of them individually. Professor Parimal Ghosh played a crucial role at a certain stage by choosing to publish an essay which has finally developed into the first chapter of the book and which helped to attract the attention of the publisher.

Outside the professional world, a group of friends, some in the real world and many via the virtual space, made life gossipy and thought provoking. Big cheers to all the usual suspects. What's life without charming in-laws, and indeed I am lucky to have met the members of Sengupta family. Finally, I thank Amrita for hooking me to rural development by introducing me to the work of Robert Chambers when I knew nothing about rural issues and providing other stimulations which need not be made public.

1

Introducing a Bengali Marxist

A fortnight after the defeat of the Left Front in the 2011 Assembly elections in West Bengal and Kerala, one of India's foremost historians, Ramchandra Guha, wrote an article in *The Caravan*. He started the essay by saying: 'The recent defeat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala and especially in West Bengal—where it ruled for 34 uninterrupted years—calls for a detached, dispassionate analysis of the party's place in the history of modern India.'[1] What struck me was Guha's use of the words 'detached' and 'dispassionate' and his desire to ascertain Communist Party of India-Marxist, *i.e.* CPI(M)'s 'place in the history of modern India'. Reading Guha's sentence, made clear to me, ironically enough, what I was struggling to do since 2007–08, following unfortunate incidents at Singur and Nandigram. It was around this time that I started to ask myself the question, 'How did I become interested in Marxism and what do I still believe in?' Asking such a question in a mood of introspection was part of a general mood of despair with the state of CPI(M), and by extension, Marxism, in West Bengal/India. What Guha was suggesting in the sentence mentioned above was what I had learnt as a student of history—one should maintain a distance from the object of study and analyse the object of study as if the analyst is an outsider/a visitor/a judge, trying to find the truth about a person/a period of time/a political regime/the socio-economic structure of a village, etc. The question I was trying to grapple with on the other hand was—being an insider to a certain historical experience, how do I write about it? I asked myself that instead of trying to write a history of Marxism, or about a particular Marxist party, or even a particular place ruled by a Marxist government, what if I tried to understand how I became interested in Marxism

and how does my story relate to the ebb and flow of historical changes during a particular period of time? This book is an attempt to create such a narrative.

Early Days

I was born in a private nursing home in a place called Dumdum in north Kolkata in the year 1971—the year made famous by Mrinal Sen in his film *Kolkata Ekattor* [2] (*Calcutta 71*). The previous few years had seen the most violent eruption of communist movement in the history of West Bengal, the Naxalite movement,[3] or the *Nokshal andolon*. By 1971, however, the movement was gradually beginning to subside and the state government under Siddhartha Shankar Ray was gaining control over it. The process of gaining control was anything but democratic, and hundreds of students and followers of the movement were tortured and killed in the name of law and order. There were violent incidents of retaliation from the Naxalites as well, and it became quite common to find someone in the neighbourhood to be missing or dead. To make matters more complicated, the 'revolutionary' and the 'criminal' became intertwined and who got killed for political reasons and who got killed for personal reasons was sometimes difficult to determine.

My parents still feel paranoid about those days. My mother recalls that she would be tense every evening about whether her husband would return home safely or not. My parents also remember dead bodies being carried away in a cart in front of them. While my parents still see the Naxalite revolt as a period of turmoil that should not come back, there were other shades of popular opinion in the world I have inhabited. The first was that the Naxalites were heroic revolutionaries who belong to the same tradition as the revolutionary extremists of the colonial era. The second was that they were good idealistic youth who somehow went the wrong way especially when they chose the path of violent revolution. The third was that they were nothing but '*dalal*s' (agents) of China and it was good that Siddhartha Shankar Ray dealt with them forcefully. There is no scientific opinion poll to determine the percentages for each such position, but all these opinions could be found as I grew up and perhaps exist even today. What is equally true is that, more than the historical facts about the movement, what continues to exist in

popular imagination is a certain stereotype—that of a thin, bearded youth in unclean clothes who smokes heavily and carries a *jhola* (side bag), so much so that if a young man decides to have a beard, he may (half-seriously) face the question, 'Are you becoming a Naxalite?'

I have no direct memory of the Naxalite movement. The movement entered my consciousness through films like *Calcutta 71* and Samaresh Majumdar's novel, *Kalbela*,[4] which was later made into a film by Goutam Ghose.[5] My earliest memory starts from a rented house in Dumdum, north Kolkata, where my parents used to live in a joint family with my grandfather and grandmother, two aunts and two uncles. There were others in the family, like my *jyatha* (my father's elder brother) and some of my father's cousins who lived nearby. It was a large house in comparison to today's *flat bari* (apartments in multi-storied buildings) standards with a largish backyard. I remember very little of that house during the period when we used to stay there as we shifted to a rented house in South Kolkata when I was about four years old. Joint families were breaking down into nuclear ones and our family was no exception. This, however, did not mean that the ties were completely lost. We visited our grandparents very often. Two visuals of this period stand out in my mind. The first was that of my grandmother who was an intensely religious person and had her own *thakur ghor* (prayer room), and we used to enjoy the rituals where *batasha* and *nokul dana* (sugar candies) were dished out to us. The food that was served after the *puja*s at home was also quite delicious. The second memory is that of my grandfather who was a lawyer and had an office (usually called a 'chamber') in the outer part of the house. This room used to be visited by all sorts of people in the evening, some were I guess his clients and some were people who used to just drop by. I knew that this was the space for grown-up people (called *boroder jaayga*) and I was not supposed to go there.

I first got to see some 'red' books at my maternal grandmother's place, which probably my uncle had collected and read at some point as a young man. Sometimes, there were discussions of contemporary politics at home. It was perhaps at this stage that the first few words and ideas of Marxism began to unconsciously enter my mind. Marxism was less clearly understood by me at this point as a political philosophy and more as the ideology of the political

party that my family supported. It was, as I understood, the most progressive political party of the country, and to be progressive meant supporting CPI(M). By the time I was about 8 or 9, I came to understand that the hammer and sickle icon meant a party of ordinary folks (*sadharon manush*) like us and not of the rich (*borolok*). Complicated concepts like 'dialectical materialism', 'class consciousness', etc., were still quite far away. I had also come to know of the Naxalites but was not clear as to what the differences between CPI(M) and Naxalites were.

By 1980, the Cold War had crept into my consciousness. Not through a sound reading of international relations but through the discourse surrounding the Olympic Games which was scheduled to be held in the USSR but the US had boycotted the Games. We had taken the side of the Soviet Union (in Bengali we preferred to say '*Raa-she-aa*'). We liked to believe that 'bad' USA was afraid of losing to 'good' USSR.

In 1981, my parents were relieved when I finally managed to pass the entrance exam of a well-known school in south Kolkata, Patha Bhavan. The school was created by a group of educationists affiliated to the CPI and was heavily influenced by the educational philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore. The most important contribution of my school to my upbringing was that it made me a bibliophile. I enjoyed reading books by the masters of Bengali literature—Tagore and also the literature meant for teenagers (*kishore-sahitya*) by authors such as Satyajit Ray, Bimal Kar, Premendra Mitra, Sunil Ganguly, Shirshendu Mukhopadhaya, Saktipada Rajguru, and others. There was also the slightly more adult detective fiction of Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay. There were also the Bengali translations of Jules Verne by Adrish Bardhan. Slowly, I also began to read books in English starting with Enid Blyton and then moving on to Sherlock Holmes and other thriller writers, such as, Alistair McLean. Enid Blyton was the first stepping stone towards English language confidence.

My love for books gradually took me towards becoming a member of the children's library at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in the Golpark area of south Kolkata. Here, in the library of a religious institution, I discovered some of the most wonderful books on modern art, scientific discoveries, and illustrated histories of modern Europe, which helped to form a modernist

mythology inside me. This was a mythology of progress and science as opposed to religion and blind faith.

Reading books was only one part of the story. I also developed a fascination for buying books and writing my name on them. The principal stumbling block in this pursuit was of course money. I used to roam around the second-hand book-stalls near Golpark which used to have a wide range of second hand books—from encyclopedias to pornographic magazines. While I did buy some important books from these stalls such as Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*[6] and magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Time* and *Newsweek*, nothing could match the delight of holding a brand new book in one's hand. The exchange rate vis-à-vis the British Pound and US Dollar at that point in time was not as harsh as it is today. Nevertheless, buying a book published by Penguin, for example, was not easy. Fortunately there was a much more attractive alternative. The book stall that I visited the most during this time, on the other side of the second-hand stalls of Golpark, a small shop owned by a certain Tiwari-*ji*, used to have a series of beautifully produced but inexpensive hard bound books coming from the USSR. The works of masters such as Tolstoy, Gorky, Dostoyevsky, Gogol and others were available in richly illustrated hardbound editions that even I could buy. It was impossible not to get attracted to these books and, of course, the writing was mesmerising to say the least. The love of these Russian books also took me, like many others, towards books by Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin. The big fat volumes of *Capital* were still a little too intimidating to buy (and read), but the book that acted as the bridge between me and Marxism was a novel named *How the Steel was Tempered*[7] by a relatively unknown writer named Nikolai Ostrovsky. The book was immensely popular at that point in time in Kolkata and also had a Bengali version named 'Ispat' or Steel. Its protagonist, a young man named Pavel Korchagin, left a deep impression not only on me but on many young hearts of my age.

Neighbourhood

One of the earliest memories I have of the hammer and sickle was the propaganda campaign that was carried out by CPI(M) workers

on the neighbourhood walls. Because of my interest in visual arts as a child I used to be fascinated by the amazing dexterity with which the party workers of CPI(M) used to write their election campaign slogans on the walls. The walls of the neighbourhood were first taken over for party slogans and graffiti before the elections. One group of junior artists used to come and white-wash the portion of the wall and write 'All wall CPI(M)' with a future date attached to it, thereby implying that the wall belonged to the party till then. Then the senior artists came and in beautiful calligraphy wrote slogans such as '*markin smrajyobad nipat jaak*' (Down with US imperialism) and *'bamfront sorkar ke bipul bhotey joyi korun'* (Vote Left Front to victory) and invariably there was a hammer and sickle next to the slogan painted in bold.

The focus of the party activities in our neighbourhood was a slum called *Gobardanga Basti.* When the *dadas* belonging to the Congress Party used to go to the slums they used to behave like feudal lords and refer to the people of the slums in the derogatory '*tui*' mode. Left Front on the other hand launched a serious slum improvement programme. Not that the slum was radically transformed but electricity and drinking water were ensured. What was most important was that the slum dwellers found a new sense of dignity vis-à-vis the middle-class *babus* of the neighbourhood, a phenomenon that was observed by G.K. Lieten[8] in rural West Bengal as well. It was no more possible for middle class *babu*s to talk to them in an undignified manner. This new found sense of dignity was expressed by the slum dwellers in a rather innovative manner. There were three different *puja*s in the neighbourhood—the *Saraswati Puja* (mainly organised by teenagers), the *Durga Puja* (organised by the middle class dominated club of the neighbourhood) and two *Kali Puja*s—one by the middle class youth and the other by the slum dwellers. The slum dwellers never participated in the Durga Puja as it was considered to be a puja of the *babu*s. Kali was on the other hand closer to the subaltern sensibility of the slum dwellers and also a symbol of power. What was most striking however was the difference in the music that was played in the two pujas. The middle-class youth was heavily into Bollywood music at that point in time, and music of the latest blockbusters from Bollywood used to be played out loudly in their *pandal*s. On the other hand, the slum dwellers made it a point to play only

Shyamasangeet, a form of Bengali devotional music exclusively for goddess Kali. There was a cultural statement in this politics of the music—the slum dwellers tried to show that they were more cultured than the middle-class *babu*s of the neighbourhood although they were poorer.

My parents never became radical communists but they taught us to treat workers with respect. This was reflected in the way we addressed domestic servants and other members of the working class who visited our household. For example, we would call our housemaid who was older than us by the same suffix as we would call any other female older than us in the household—Sanaka-*di*. Similarly an electrician used to come every now and then for various kinds of repair work and he used to call my father with the suffix '*da*' instead of the more traditional '*babu*' and we used to address him as Sidhyeswar-*da* just as we would call any elderly person from our class. They were not made to feel that they belonged to lower class and caste in the language in which they were talked to. I was in fact quite fond of Sidhyeswar-da who was a regular party member. It was he who introduced CPI(M)'s party newspaper *Ganashakti* to my father who became a subscriber. It was initially a four-page weekly and later on became a daily. It was party policy that every member, and Sidhyswar-*da* was one of them, had to sell a certain number of papers every month. Hence he approached my father.

In my mental register another name slowly came to be ingrained as I was growing up—party office. This was technically speaking the office of the local committee of CPI(M). I was not directly associated with it but the party office was an important landmark by 1984-85. So for example while giving directions to someone it was quite common to say, 'walk straight, you will see the party office and then...' More than any individual, CPI(M) was represented by the party office or LC, that is, Local Committee.

At this stage I had no knowledge of what land reform was and what was *panchayati raj*—the two pillars of Left Front's success in West Bengal after coming to power. Our own experience as city dwellers was of prolonged power cuts. The word 'government' somehow did not become a respectable one even though a revolutionary party had come to power and we stoically coped with power cuts (popularly known as 'loadshedding') almost every evening, especially during the summer months. Left Front continued

to be supported in our family more because the party was part of our identity rather than because of its performance in urban areas. There was also endemic violence in our neighbourhood between the criminal elements of the two slums on two sides of our neighbourhood which was brought under control after much effort by the police. The experience of riding in a public bus was also not pleasurable to say the least. The buses tended to be overcrowded and getting a toe hold on the steps of the bus used to require lot of skill. But for teenagers like me getting into a 'running bus', that is, while the bus was on the move was a source of masculine pride.

Although it is true that the Left Front had secured a strong position during this time and I was coming under various types of Marxist influences it would be a mistake not to note an important social transformation that was taking place in middle-class society during the 80s. Among my schoolmates there was already a trend that became more and more pronounced as years went by—not to be interested in politics or political ideology at all and concentrate solely on studies and career building. Times had changed from the late sixties and early seventies. Perhaps because of the experience of the brutal repression of the Naxalite movement in which many bright students had lost their lives, parents in middle-class Bengal were more and more becoming conservative and rigidly pushing their children like race horses into a clearly defined career path—pass *Madhyamik* (class X level) with highest possible scores, join 'Science' stream in Higher Secondary school and then appear for 'Joint' and 'IIT', that is, entrance level tests for medical and engineering streams. This defined success. To be interested in politics was an exception rather than the rule.

Before proceeding further, it may be useful to put the time I am talking about in terms of the standard historical narrative of West Bengal.[9] The period 1967–77 was a period of political turmoil, including the Naxalite movement and the Bangladesh liberation war which led to massive influx of refugees from across the border. Rural poverty was very high. West Bengal was however still a leader in industrial production in India. The *Zamindari* system was abolished but agriculture and agrarian relations were yet to be modernised. Kolkata was the most important city, indeed the only major city of the state, had to cope with an enormous population pressure because of the influx of the refugees from across the

border.[10] In course of the 80s, rural West Bengal saw a threefold transformation for which a certain amount of credit goes to the Left Front. The first two were land reform and panchayati raj and the third was the green revolution. Green Revolution was however not necessarily the credit of the Left Front. There is a debate among scholars as to whether land reform and panchayati raj led to greater productivity but there is no doubt that because of these three transformations put together rural poverty was quite dramatically reduced though not eliminated. However on the other hand West Bengal began to witness a steady decline in industrial production. The city was clearly less of a priority for the Left Front which explains why we had to cope with power cuts and crowded buses. Politically this was the time when Congress began to decline and CPI(M) gradually strengthened its party machinery in both urban and rural areas. Between 1977 and 1985 Left Front was able to establish itself firmly as the hegemon in West Bengal. The Naxalites had become politically insignificant and divided into innumerable factions. The division between the democratic left and the revolutionary left, though, was cast in stone and they saw each other as enemies rather than as comrades.

End of the Soviet Dream

In 1985, we came to know that a certain Mikhail Gorbachev had become the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Union. From various sources I could gather that here was a man who was trying to do something different, trying to rectify the ills of Soviet Union and was certainly as glamorous as Ronald Reagan, the US President. Terms such as 'glastnost'[11] and 'perestroika'[12] became familiar to us. The festival of India in Moscow and Gorbachev's visit to India was widely covered on television and we admired the suave charm of the man. Soviet leaders were usually grim but here was a man who was smiling. At the 1988 Olympics, Soviet Union won 132 medals (55 Gold, 31 Silver and 46 Bronze), East Germany won 102 medals (37 Gold, 35 Silver, 30 Bronze) and USA came third with only 94 medals (36 Gold, 31 Silver, 27 Bronze). This was again a thumping victory for us. It may seem strange today but at that point in time the news of the problems of the US economy

was more in the air than something going terribly wrong in the Soviet Union. USA was having a trillion dollar national debt and a monthly $15 billion deficit. On 19 October 1987, 'Black Monday' it was called, the US stock market crashed. Dow Jones went down by 508 points in one day. Half a trillion USD worth of wealth was lost. This was the biggest crisis in the US economy since 1929. By the end of the year, more than 48,000 Americans were found to be suffering from a new incurable disease called AIDS. On 4 January 1988, *Time* Magazine declared its Man of the Year—Mikhail Gorbachev. The same issue described 1987 as 'the roughest year' for USA.

However a few minor cracks in my belief system had started to appear during this time. From 1986–87, I had developed a habit of buying old copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* from the second-hand bookshops in the Golpark area. It may be noted here that there was no internet at that point of time and there was no scope of watching international television channels. In this information starved period the news magazines were the only source of serious journalistic reports. One of the attractions was of course the brilliant photographs, but the detailed news reports on the Eastern Block that were coming during this time were raising a few doubts. I was not able to dismiss them as bourgeois propaganda.

Then came the first big shock. I was 18 years old. I was shocked by what happened at the Tiananmen Square in China.[13] My youngest uncle, who was in his late twenties, was the only member of my family who was an active member of CPI(M) for some time. In fact, the copy of Communist Manifesto that I inherited was presented by him to my mother on her birthday in 1975. *Chhotka* (meaning the youngest uncle), as I used to call him, was quite close to me. We shared a common anti-religious attitude and a love for literature. I remember that after the Tiananmen Massacre I had a huge quarrel with him. He agreed that the event was tragic but continued to argue that for the sake of the revolution this had to be done; there was no other way. I was not convinced but remained in a state of confusion.

A few months later came the second big shock—the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.[14] It was difficult to make sense of what was going on. But the images of youths breaking the wall and moving from East to West Germany were difficult to absorb. There was also a feeling

that more was in store. But what was about to happen was beyond anybody's wildest imagination.

It will be wrong, however, to project the years 1988–1990 only as years of internal political crisis. By middle of 1988, my *Madhyamik* examination was over and I was now relieved that I had the freedom to study only the social sciences. These years were also the years of embarking upon adulthood—bunking school, going on vacation with friends, tasting alcohol, experiencing love, and watching movies only meant for adults. In quotidian terms, life in fact became better as we shifted to an upper-middle-class locality in south Kolkata called Golf Green as my father got a quarter there. The horrible days of power cuts were also a thing of the past. The locality was planned and unusually for Kolkata, had considerable amount of greenery. My academic situation also looked bright for the first time in life as I did surprisingly well in the Higher Secondary Examination in 1990, and even managed to pass the entrance examination of Presidency College, which was at that point in time one of the best undergraduate colleges in India. My parents at last had something to feel proud of. Thus ironically while my ideological world was in turmoil, the practical side of life was indeed looking good.

Walking in through the gates of Presidency College as a student was not just a matter of entering into one of the finest colleges in India but entering into a Bengali mythological space that went back to the so called Bengal Renaissance.[15] It was not simply a matter of improving one's career prospects but also finding one's foothold in the imaginary space of modern India's meritocratic elite. Theoretically at least, only merit was important, anybody who could pay Rupees Seventeen per month could study, and the space was open to men and women irrespective of caste or religion. The reality was somewhat different from the myth, although that did not reduce the significance of the institution as a modernising space. The Geology department, for example, was open only to male students and the hostel for male students was open only to Hindus. Similarly, while the College was open to students from all backgrounds our school education system was such that the overwhelming majority of the students were from Kolkata rather than the districts, from private rather than government schools, overwhelmingly upper caste Hindu and hardly ever belonging to

the poorer sections of the society. I can recall only a few Muslim students and cannot recall a single student from Scheduled Tribe background. Having said this, it must be admitted that Presidency College represented one of the finest examples in the country of liberal humanities tradition – where debate was encouraged and thoughts were not censored and both male and female students enjoyed a space of relative gender equality.

Looking back, I think I was fortunate to get some outstanding teachers precisely at a point of time when I had reached a stage of intellectual and emotional confusion. Doing my undergraduate course in History was of course about trying to get the coveted 'first class' in order to improve my career prospects, but it was a lot more than that. The 'History' that we read in school was rather boring and was almost all about rote learning rather than indulgence in debates. Thanks to my teachers, History now became more about interpretations by various Historians rather than a bland chronology of facts. While Marxism outside the class room was facing its greatest challenge ever, inside the class room it was almost impossible to deny the Marxist Historians their supremacy. The works of D.D. Kosambi[16] and Romila Thapar[17] in ancient Indian history, that of Irfan Habib[18] in medieval Indian history, that of Sumit Sarkar[19] in modern Indian history, Eric Hobsbawm,[20] Georges Lefebvre[21] and Albert Soboul[22] in case of European History to name just a few, had a powerful impact on me and filled me with great pride.

At the same time though, we were introduced to some of the challenges that Marxist interpretations were beginning to face. Irfan Habib was being challenged by 'revisionist' historians like Muzaffar Alam,[23] the Marxist–Nationalist interpretation of colonialism and Indian freedom struggle was challenged by the followers of Lewis Namier in Cambridge, popularly known as the Cambridge School,[24] interpretations of the French Revolution were challenged by historians like Simon Schama[25] who refused to see any deep economic structural reason behind the revolution, and a new radical school of historiography had emerged spearheaded by Ranajit Guha known as the Subalterns,[26] who moved away from class analysis to a broad division of the society into 'elite' and 'subaltern'. In case of European History, Allan Bullock had written a book that sought to show Hitler and Stalin as two sides of the same coin[27]—an interpretation that infuriated our teacher of European History who

was of Marxist disposition. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*[28] in which he predicted that the battle between ideologies has come to an end with the fall of the Soviet Union, was in circulation. Older anti-Marxist books such as Karl Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies*[29] also had made a revival. The works of Annales School[30] of writing History, who offered an alternative methodology to Marxist class analysis to understand long term changes in society, was also discussed in the classroom, especially Marc Bloch's masterpiece on European Feudalism, *Feudal Society*[31] Hence although Marxist historians were pre-eminent there were also some major challenges to their perspectives. One may note here that while I came to know of certain alternative perspectives to the Marxist way of looking at the past, I was not as yet aware of the ideas associated with Foucault or Derrida or postmodernism. These came to me a little later, during my MA days, but by the early 90s such ideas were very much in vogue in Kolkata academic circles. The age of certitude and security of ideas like 'base-superstructure', 'contradiction' and 'mode of production' was clearly over. New terms like 'discourse', 'binary', 'power/knowledge' were gaining currency.

Outside the classroom, there was College Street. College Street has a special place in Bengali society for its book shops, especially the second hand book shops. It was also the mythic space of radical thought, romance and revolution. The Coffee House was symbolic of Kolkata's Leftist intellectual ferment. By early 90s this mythic space had to some extent lost its shine and indeed I was quite disappointed with the crowd I saw in Coffee House. But it was the College Street area that I found many of the Soviet publications of Marx, Engels and Lenin which were now beginning to disappear. On 1 October 1991, I bought a Soviet edition of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy.*[32] It was a beautifully produced hard bound book in three volumes. However soon it became clear to me that I do not have the intellectual capacity to actually understand the text. The first volume of *Capital* alone, more than 700 hundred pages of dense text, was intimidating to say the least. So I preferred to rely on explanations offered by two highly readable books which I found in College Street bookshops, Robert L. Heilbroner's *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times and Ideas of Great Economic Thinkers*[33] and T.Z. Lavine's *From Socrates to Sartre: The*

Philosophic Quest.[34] A series called the Fontana Modern Masters had also started to appear in the bookstores and that contained a masterly short introduction to Marx by David McLellan.[35] I found these three books useful for getting a reasonably good understanding of the basic ideas of Marx. The way Heilbroner, for example, explained the logic of *Capital* in about 40-odd pages was quite astonishing. The title of the chapter on Marx, 'The Inexorable System of Karl Marx', also left a deep impression on me.

In the outside world, however, Soviet Union, to our astonishment, was falling apart. On 25 December 1991 the red flag was lowered for the last time and the next day Soviet Union was formally dissolved.[36] It was ironic that precisely at the point of time when the Soviet Union was crumbling and Marx was going out of fashion that I managed to acquire my first understanding of the basic principles of Marxism. In fact, as I was buying the three volumes of *Capital*, a person at the store said, *'niye jaan ekhon, er por aar paben na'* (take them now, soon they would be unavailable) hinting at the stoppage of production and supply of such books from Soviet Union.

Apart from the class room and College Street, the third important space was the canteen and the student union room. The student union of Presidency College was dominated by the Naxalites during the late 60s and early 70s. Even in 1990, the year I joined, the Union was controlled by a pro-Naxalite organisation named PCSA. By 1991, this space had began to see an important transformation. But to understand this transformation one must first recognise that by 1990, that is, after 13 years in power, CPI(M) had established an iron grip on the student unions of the state through its student wing Student Federation of India or SFI. It was not uncommon for it to apply intimidating tactics and win without any contest. There were very few student unions in colleges which were not in the control of SFI. What was however most frustrating was the fact that student unions, even when they were not run by SFI were invariably controlled from outside by some political party or the other, and the student unions became agents of the political interests of these political parties rather than the reflection of the ideas, dreams and interests of the students themselves. It is in this context that a loose and somewhat ideologically confused, but united in its opposition to party control, political outfit named Independent

Consolidation (IC) came to power in 1991 in the Presidency College Student Union. Their victory was quite remarkable as the organisation was formed only a year or so earlier.

IC kept its door open to ideas coming from all sides, Marxist or otherwise. It attracted students who were against outside domination of the union but who belonged to various political beliefs. It is fair to say that what IC was able to introduce was not any clearly definable political/ideological agenda that was either left or right but a certain amount of healthy confusion and generated debates. It rebelled against the notion of student politics being remote-controlled by Party leaders from outside. Organisationally, IC was a loose formation and not a strict cadre based party with a definite hierarchy. Everything was however not laudable about it. It showed at least two flaws of democratic politics as we have experienced it. The first was populism, which got reflected in the fact that the Annual Cultural Festival (more popularly known as 'fest') was the most important event in the calendar of the Union. This helped IC to attract students even if they were not interested in political/ ideological debates and convert them into vote banks. The other activity which had some popular appeal was anti-establishment agitation ('principal *gherao*') but what were never taken up were constructive activities to improve the condition of the college, such as improving the college library or social work for the disadvantaged children who worked in the canteen.

The second flaw of IC was factionalism which divided the leaders of the outfit within a few years of its formation. Typically these were personality clashes couched as ideological differences. Nonetheless, student politics in Presidency College was at least free from physical violence, which often characterised the politics of other colleges.

In 1992, I sat for my Part I examination and missed the coveted 'first class' by less than 1 per cent. It was a sad moment. However a bigger tragedy was on the cards. Since middle of 1980s India was witnessing a revival of Hindu right wing forces around the issue of the Ram Temple at Ajodhya. The 'Sangh Parivar' combined fierce nationalism with anti-Islamic statements and was led by L.K. Advani. On December 6, 1992, roughly one year after the fall of the Soviet Union, a violent mob of 'Kar Sevaks' brought down the Babri Masjid,[37] an event that shocked the nation.

The event was followed by riots all over India, claiming around 2000 lives. Kolkata was also to some extent affected and our college remained closed for a few days. When we could return to College after a few days, a procession was organised by the Student Union in which many of the teachers also participated. We went round the nearby neighbourhoods asking for peace. I am not sure whether the poor people living around the college were convinced by what the students and teachers of an elite institution were saying. It was perhaps less for them and more for us that we took part in the procession. Our own belief system was under attack and it was our anxiety that took us to the streets in a symbolic march. A few students were also beginning to talk in a Hindu Right perspective and intense debates in the canteen were common. Academic questions such as the religious policy of Akbar no more remained a strictly academic issue. Although the Hindu Right explanation was politically weak in West Bengal and almost insignificant in terms of numbers within the college, yet they had an impact in the sense that it became important to refute their claims. In some cases such as their claim regarding destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers was difficult to deny. These ideas never acquired in the world around me a hegemonic position, but nonetheless, it did throw a challenge to the secular-rationalist self that I had developed as a teenager.

Similarly, from 1990 onwards, student community across India was divided by the approval of caste-based reservation as per recommendations of the Mandal Commission that V.P. Singh introduced. A Delhi University student, Rajiv Goswami, tried to immolate himself in protest against the decision of the Government. West Bengal was, however, not one of the nerve centres of the anti-reservation movement. There were heated arguments and debates in the college canteen, although the issue was less important than Hindutva. For me, and perhaps for many others, who did not accept caste, it was a particularly difficult moment. Reservation stood against my vision of a casteless India, and it stood in contradiction to the belief that merit should be the sole basis of selection in Universities and jobs. There were crude anti-reservation jokes—whether you would like to have an operation when the surgeon was a student who belonged to the reservation quota, but the larger issue of caste-based India versus casteless India remained. I was at this stage against reservation because I believed that reservation

did not lead to emancipation. I was perhaps not evolved enough to ask myself why there were so few students from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) or the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in my college.

Along with 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'quota', terms such as 'liberalisation', 'globalisation', 'market economy' and 'MNC' were also gaining currency during this time.[38] The Nehruvian model of mixed economy was beginning to be considered outdated. Congress Government under Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh were beginning to integrate the Indian economy with the world economy and multinational corporations (MNCs) began to find their way into India in greater number and with a new legitimacy. Students in our college started to think about CAT exam and getting into management institutions which were passports to unbelievable salaries in MNCs. The buzz in the air was—there is no alternative to capitalism and the question was whether India can join the club or not. All this was happening while USA under George Bush (Senior) had unleashed, in the name of democracy, an imperialist war in the Gulf.[39]

For me, like many others, the world had thus changed forever, a change that was difficult to come to terms with. It was simply not possible to accept that the Cold War was over and the US had won it and it was the only superpower in the world now. A book that somehow came as a solace was Paul Kennedy's bestselling book, *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*.[40] I spent a large chunk of my pocket money to buy a copy of the book in which Kennedy predicted that the US would not be able to remain a superpower for long and would have to accept itself as one the players in a multi-polar world. After reading the reassuring last chapter, I wrote an article in our college magazine on this.

There was no jolt to me in my family life, which continued its middle-class existence, in fact, improving somewhat in terms of quality of life. I had my share of youthful fun and romance as well. But at an ideological level, the events of 1988–92 destroyed something deep inside. The belief system that was created within me between 1979 and 1985 now lay in shambles. The security of a rationalist–Marxist worldview was beginning to fall apart, but there was no clear alternative path to pursue either. It was a time for chaos and confusion for a large section of the youth of my generation. As I completed my graduation in 1993, I remained

sympathetic to Marxism but did not see any particular political party or movement that I could support. I continued to believe in Marxism but understood that there were many questions that the ideology could not answer. I had to accept the brutalities of Soviet Union, especially under Stalin and post-Tiananmen China was not a source of inspiration either. In all probability the reason why many in my generation felt attracted toward the songs of Suman Chattopadhyay (later Kabir Suman) during this time was precisely the fact that he reflected this mood—anti-capitalist, against the conservatism of CPI(M) but not a Naxalite either, fiercely anti-establishment and somewhere maintaining the utopian dream of a better world. This was very different from the songs of an earlier generation such as the ones composed by Salil Chowdhury for example, that were directly related to mobilisation by the Communist Party through the Indian People's Little Theatre.

Caste / Class / Identity

Let me pause here and ask: how did class, caste and linguistic identity inform my move towards Marxism? Looking back, I think there was something middle-class and something Bengali about my road to Marxism. It was middle-class in the sense that it was not the experience of working class struggles that took me to Marxism. Indeed at this stage of life I was far removed from any kind of even moderate activism. It was primarily through family influences and through books that I became interested in Marxism. Yet, it would be simplistic to see my social position as similar to that of the *bhadralok* elite. Our family, and I think most families that were drawn towards Marxism, were not from the erstwhile landed *bhadralok* society, but rather from a middle class families the likes of which have been portrayed by Satyajit Ray in films like *Mahanagar*[41] or *Jana Aranya*[42]. Like the families portrayed in these films ours was a middle class family and not really the elite of the society. Yet there were similarities with the *bhadralok* elite of the society in terms of choice of cultural icons, a shared space of Bengali pride over great Bengali cultural products, and certain way of speaking in Bengali and English.

How did caste play a role? Since my father was a refugee from Bangladesh, he was not able to use his upper caste status for any

economic gain. He did not have any land to fall back upon. He had to find his way through school and college and find his source of livelihood through merit rather than by using his caste status. Caste also did not play any role in the process of my upbringing, except during the occasion when I was under pressure to adopt the sacred thread which I declined. What mattered for social standing, in the absence of serious wealth, was academic performance and culture rather than the caste status. Thus, knowing Tagore or Marx was an important cultural capital. By the time I was a teenager, caste had ceased to be a source of pride and privilege in the world around me although it mattered in arranged marriages. What mattered was not so much caste but which school or college I was in and how I was performing in the school exams, and whether I knew Tagore or Dickens. It was important whether I knew Bengali and English, belonged to a good school/college and whether I did well academically. But caste did continue to play a shadowy role in the social space as I cannot recall any person from the SC or ST communities ever belonging to our social circle. This was not a conscious policy followed by our family, but the unconscious divide between the upper and lower castes continued irrespective of the coming of Marxism. Although, Marxism and perhaps other progressive thinking destroyed caste as an intellectual category, it continued to play an unconscious role in shaping social relations.

In another crucial sense, my road to Marxism was peculiarly Bengali but not necessarily middle-class. Most Bengalis, irrespective of class or caste, are brought up reading Bengali writers/thinkers and their English/European/American counterparts. Hindi or other Indian languages and their intellectuals are hardly ever given any respect. Intellectually Bengali society is much closer to London or New York than Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu. Hence names like Ram Manohar Lohia[43] or Jayprakash Narain[44] never figured in the intellectual space that I belonged to even though they were important socialist intellectuals. We never read authors who wrote in Hindi and hardly knew anything about them. Thus, I (and many others) aspired to read Althusser or Perry Anderson, but not Lohia or J.P. Those names were simply not sexy and not in circulation in the intellectual space of my school and college days. Among other important Marxist/socialist thinkers, E.M.S. Namboodiripad's[45] name was known to me but once again he didn't have the glamour

of someone like Antonio Gramsci. This reluctance to read a thinker born in India outside Bengal was definitely a colonial legacy; one that ever so subtly drew the boundaries of my intellectual landscape. The socialist/Marxist in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh did not exist in my bookshelf. I do not think I was an exception to the general trend among people around me.

This was perhaps a crucial limitation of the Marxism that I, along with many others, imbibed in Bengal. The Marxist movement in Bengal failed to develop dialogues with various socialist forces in the Hindi heartland and other parts of India. We read Russian books in English and books coming from the UK and the US, and books of other European lanuages translated into English but did not care to learn the language, culture and intellectual currents of other Indian states. Therefore, our Marxism failed to grow and acquire an all-India perspective. The Marxism that developed in West Bengal did not expand to other neighbouring states in the 80s and 90s. When a movement fails to grow it becomes stagnant, and then atrophies. This is what happened to Marxism in Bengal.

If lack of dialogue with the other states and their cultures was an important aspect of the time, then the other puzzling silence was regarding ideas associated with social democracy. After liberalisation and the fall of Soviet Union, it became clear that West Bengal cannot avoid private capital. And for a party which was significantly present only in three states of India it looked a rather long shot to be able to dismantle the global capitalist economy. At this stage perhaps an argument in favour of social democracy could have retained a strong commitment towards poverty alleviation, healthcare and basic education while at the same time achieving economic growth through private capital. Instead CPI(M) swung from anti-imperialist rhetoric to neoliberal capitalism. Marx was kept in the bookshelves and for brigade parade ground rallies but in reality it was time for Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to be set up. Thus, by mid-90s, Marxism as an idea had become more or less irrelevant in Bengal. What was left was CPI(M) as a party/organisation which was keen on staying in power but was not clear as to which ideological/policy direction it wanted to pursue. How that led to its electoral defeat in 2011 is, of course, another story, which will be discussed towards the end of this book.

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2

Globalisation, Hindutva and Conservative Marxism

Satellite Television, Coca Cola and Pepsi

During the early years of the 90s while books on Marxism published in the Soviet Union were slowly disappearing from bookstalls, there was a revolution in our domestic space in the form of satellite television. In one sense, it was welcomed by all as people were tired of state-controlled television, especially the news. I remember the first time I visited the local cable operator to find out about this new technological innovation while we were staying at Golf Green in southern Kolkata. The *malik* (owner) was probably some kind of a local strongman who added the cable business to his portfolio of semi-legal business operations and had a large television in his office room. He showed me the various channels that one could see—BBC, CNN, the various STAR channels, and so on and so forth. All these channels were available for a paltry sum of money. Thus, a grey coloured cable line entered our apartment and was plugged into the television set.

Soon there was an avalanche of American soaps, news and sports on the screen. CNN started to telecast the Gulf War live and transformed war into an exciting package of visual display of American might to be watched from home like a television serial.[1] Television soaps like *Santa Barbara*[2] and *The Bold and the Beautiful*,[3] as well as non-fiction programmes like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*[4] began to display the fantastic consumerism of the super rich in America, subtly pushing the ideological position that this is what life is all about—get rich, make money, have fun. The two

soaps mentioned above revolved around the sexual lives of rich men and women who were interchangeably falling in love with each other, so much so that it became difficult to keep track of who was in love with whom after a point. Star Movies began to dish out Hollywood films round the clock, every day. *Baywatch*,[5] a serial on coastguards in an American coastal city, became a huge hit, not because of the storyline but because of glamorous female actors in swimsuits. We were also suddenly flooded with sports programmes on golf and motor racing, neither of which was very popular sports earlier in this part of the world. Non-fiction programmes such *Donahue*[6] and *Oprah Winfrey Show*[7] brought in problems of American household straight into the living rooms of Kolkata. MTV (Music Television) blasted American pop music into our ears.

This was accompanied by the return of Coca Cola[8] and the introduction of Pepsi.[9] In my childhood, Coca Cola was banned in India by the Government and this allowed Indian companies to produce soft drinks. The most popular was a brand called Thums Up which was produced by a company called Parle. As the wave of globalisation began, Coca Cola was allowed to re-enter and the multinational giant bought Parle immediately, including its brands of soft drinks. Thums Up was retained as a brand but it became a Coca Cola product. Coca Cola and Pepsi immediately launched into a marketing war through television ads and through sponsorship of cricket, especially one-day cricket. Street side shops were flooded with the logos of the respective brands. Bollywood actors were brought in to promote the brands. Soon one could hardly get any soft drink except brands owned by these two giants. Pepsi offered to the new generation in urban India a new ideological mantra, 'Ye Dil Mange More' (this heart wants more). Marxist Kolkata was no exception. The ruling Left did not show any special interest in opposing the entry of the multinational giants. A quiet victim was a local brand of ice-cream soda called *Bijoli grill*, which I particularly liked.

A crucial ingredient of this cultural/ideological invasion of American capitalism was a certain amount of indigenisation of the brands. MTV,[10] Coca Cola and Pepsi successfully acquired a national look, changed their medium of communication to 'Hinglish'—mixture of Hindi and English that is popular among north Indian youth—and made Indian film stars and sport stars their brand

ambassadors. Thus Coca Cola's most popular slogan showed Indian actor Amir Khan saying, 'Thanda Matlaab Coca Cola' (chilled means Coca Cola). MTV also slowly moved from pure English music videos to a mixture of Hindi and English videos with the DJs talking in a mixture of Hindi and English. Star TV later on opened a Hindi channel and its most famous show was 'Kaun Banega Crorepati?'[11] hosted by Amitabh Bachchan. This was a quiz show based on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?'[12] which was born in the UK, but later on had a hugely successful US version too. The programme pumped in the ideological position that *you should be rich and here's your chance of becoming one* to middle-class India. This show also transformed the meaning of a quiz show to us; previously the national television used to have highly popular quiz show among college students which was primarily about knowledge, KBK transformed into a 'show' which was primarily about becoming rich.

Two other important transformations took place around me from late eighties onwards. The first was the search for the US based groom for marriage, popularly known as the NRI groom. In the marriage market, Bengali grooms settled in the US and earning in Dollar became the most sought after *jamai* (son-in-law). Getting one's daughter married to a groom in the US and thereby occasionally visiting the US became a status symbol in middle class society. In case the groom was not already based in the US he at least needed to be a potential NRI, that is, one who is employed in a industry where he is likely to go to the US. Indeed the NRI became a superior Indian to the Indian living in India.

That the NRI was superior to the 'native' was reflected in popular television serials as well. A Bengali serial name *Tero Parbon*,[13] which launched the career of actor Sabyasachi Chakrabarty by making him a household name, depicted episodes of a young man's life who solved various social problems. This young man, named Gora, was not however the bearded Naxalite young man of *Kolkata 71* of Mrinal Sen or Animesh of Samaresh Majumdar's *Kalbela*. He was not fighting against the state with guns and did not lay down his life to become a martyr. Rather he was clean shaven, educated and suave young man who did not subscribe to any particular political ideology. Unlike the bearded Naxalite who left his studies for the cause of revolution, Gora was financially solvent (though

not rich), had spent some time abroad and was able to solve problems without violently confronting the state.

The second important trend, and this was sometimes related to the first, was the shift from UK to US as the choice for destination for higher studies. It will be a simplification to say that every person who went to the US to pursue higher education believed in the American Dream but it is safe to say that a substantial number of them did.

Meanwhile, for the middle class society around me, an opportunity opened up to live the American Dream in India itself. Thanks to the entry of the MNCs and the software boom, we could hear of our college mates, coming out of the Indian Institutes of Management and getting fabulous salaries, buying cars and apartments even before they were thirty—something that was unimaginable a decade earlier. If somebody could be savvy in the stock market as well, then their annual income could reach astonishing proportions. This of course was possible only in case of a few, but the lure of big salaries resulted in the mushrooming of Management Institutes all over the country, including Bengal. Those who could not get into the IIMs went to study in these institutions in the hope of landing jobs with fat pay cheque. At the lowest end of this boom, the urban youth could get into call-centres, master the American accent, get a fake American identity, and earn salaries that were decent enough to cover their lifestyle costs. Kolkata was somewhat late in catching up with this software boom but in course of time a Sector V emerged in the eastern part of the city to cater to the software industry. One of my cousin sisters used to work there, and one day she told me that the makeshift shanties that provide cheap lunch, known in Bengali as *jhupri,* has been Americanised as '*jhoop*s'.

In 1994, a Bengali woman named Sushmita Sen became the first Miss Universe,[14] a beauty contest that is organised by an American company and was telecast live through satellite channels in India along with rest of the world. In the same year, another Indian woman, Aishwariya Rai, won the Miss World[15] contest and this created the platform for a beauty industry in India. A Bengali women's magazine named *Sananda*,[16] from the anti-Left Anandabazar Group, which is the most important media house in Bengal, started a similar beauty pageant named *Sananda Tilottama*[17]

in 1995. The participation in such beauty pageants did raise a certain amount of controversy when it happened. There was a conservative argument against it which described it as immoral and there was also a feminist argument which described this as an attempt at commodification of women but such arguments were not able to make much of an impression. This is because the participation in such pageants became intertwined with a narrative of liberation—of women shedding inhibitions, of women doing what they want to do, of women making it big in life.

Tero Parbon's Gora, popularity of satellite television, Coke and Pepsi, prospects of jobs in MNCs, success of Sushmita Sen in Miss Universe, growing popularity of US education – all these reflected the changes happening in Bengali society between late eighties and early 90s. Bengal was moving away from an earlier period of revolutionary discourse and coming to terms with globalisation of the Indian economy. The Bengalis who came to be admired were not revolutionaries but smart and successful in the international arena. The new anxiety was whether Bengal can catch the globalisation bus – should computerisation be allowed in offices and banks? Should Bengal set up call-centres? Why did Bengal allow Bangalore to take the lead in IT industry? Should girls participate in beauty contests and/or become models? How to make money in the stock market? The anxiety no more was whether Charu Majumdar was right or wrong.

Calcutta University

In 1993 I joined the MA in Modern History course of Calcutta University. By this time the best students preferred to leave for Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi if they could not get scholarship to go abroad. Calcutta University was no more the most preferred destination for those who wanted to study in India. For personal reasons which need not be discussed here, I preferred not to try JNU and stayed back. This gave me an opportunity to experience the University life from inside and also see the changing intellectual milieu of Kolkata during this time.

How was student life in Calcutta University? To begin with, the 'campus', after studying in Presidency College, was bit of a shock. The MA classes were held in a small and badly built building near

Ballygunje in South Kolkata(unofficially known as the Hazra Campus). There was no space for recreation, no green grass or empty space to sit and discuss, the rooms were not well-lit, the glasses of the windows were often broken and some rooms had cracks on the wall which raised doubts regarding the competency of the contractor who built that building. Architecturally there was nothing, it was a just a three-storied block, not different from government offices. The building was located next to a taller building which was also disastrously designed which taught the law courses. Our building had three departments – Modern History, Ancient History and Islamic History. There was a main gate on the Hazra road, which was followed by a non-metalled road leading to the entrance of the History Department. The ground floor had one class room apart from the stairs. The first floor consisted of administrative section and the rooms for various faculty members, the second consisted of class rooms and the third consisted of a small departmental library which stored some of the relevant books for students and was looked after by a person who was not a qualified librarian. The faculty members usually shared rooms, some of which were very small and unimaginatively decorated with some tables and chairs thrown in without any regard for aesthetics. In at least one room there was a diagonal crack on the wall from ceiling to ground which raised the fear that the wall might collapse at some point. The class rooms were not lecture theatres but large rooms with benches for students, a raised platform for teachers which had a table and a chair and a black board hung on the wall behind the raised platform. This was in sharp contrast to beautiful campus of Presidency College and the sprawling campus of JNU which had a lively campus life and it was not difficult to understand why many students preferred not to enroll in Calcutta University.

The other big difference, which had a greater impact on the quality of education, was a populist policy of allowing more than hundred students in a master degree course.[18] In all good universities at the masters level only a hand full of students, seriously interested in the course are allowed. This was the policy that was followed by JNU, which was also primarily a Leftist University. However for Left Front regime it was important that many students were enrolled so that none can raise the issue of elitism against it. Thus we had more than hundred students of varying capacities in our class. It

will be safe to say that given the fact that studying History rarely lead to lucrative jobs, the overwhelming majority of the students, mostly female, were only half-interested in the course and were waiting to get married. The students were used to taking 'notes' and therefore the faculty members had no option but to give lectures in such a way that the students got 'notes' and more complicated pedagogical techniques like presentation of papers, doing book reviews etc were avoided. The large number of students most of whom were rather weak in capacity also meant a dissertation at the end of the course was out of question. The age-old evaluation method of sitting for an examination at the end of the two-year course was followed.

The course was divided into six compulsory 'papers' and two optional 'special papers'. The compulsory papers were taught in the general class of more than hundred students but since the optional papers gave quite few choices, the number of students became smaller. My choice was Economic History of Modern India, where we had five students. These classes therefore became lively and full of discussions whereas the general classes were mostly about 'notes' and had very little room for discussions and questions.

This policy of a large number of students in the class room had a negative impact on the teachers also. The quality of the faculty, barring a few, was generally good and certainly not worse than any other University in India. Many of them did their PhD in the best universities of the world and had substantial publications. Again barring a few, most of the faculty members were keen on teaching if the student was sufficiently interested. They were willing to discuss issues outside the class-room as well. But in the general class they had to dilute the level of teaching. One Professor, who was not capable of speaking much in Bengali, in fact wrote down his lecture on the black board, so that the weaker students could copy that down as his English had an Oxbridge accent which many could not follow.

Within a short while I came to understand the weakness of our general education system which produced the average student of the class. I was fortunate to go to a good private school and one of the best undergraduate colleges in the country and therefore acquired the skill of reading and assimilating knowledge from books and academic papers and expressing my views in my own language.

Before joining my MA class I did not think of this as a rare quality. But the two years and a bit in the MA course taught me that majority of our students are far less fortunate. They only learn to memorise class notes, copy select portions from books or articles and learn them by heart. Barring a few students, almost nobody had the skill of expressing their opinions in their own words, irrespective of the language they chose to write in. If the problem was only that of comprehending English then it would have been one thing, the truth is that among those who chose to write in Bengali very few were capable of using their own words. The majority of the students knew neither English nor Bengali; they only knew how to memorise class notes and ready-made answers prepared by private tutors. I understood that in most undergraduate colleges this was the standard practice and that was what they were accustomed to. Preparing for an examination meant firstly making a selection of probable questions based on last 10 years of question papers and then blindly memorizing the answers for them and hoping that in the exam the selected questions ('suggestions') would match and they would then be able to write those answers. A standard phrase in circulation after the exam was *'kota common elo?'* (how many in common?) meaning how many questions in the exam matched the list of probable questions prepared before hand?

While the large number of students in the class room and its unfortunate impact can be easily attributed to populist policies of the University/ LF Government, there were other aspects of academic/intellectual life which is more difficult to explain. Perhaps this had something to do with a certain culture of conservatism which I shall explore in this chapter elsewhere as well. By about 1993–95 the discipline of History and social sciences in general in Kolkata was sharply divided according to one's position vis-à-vis certain new ideas/concepts/names. The common word that was used to designate such ideas was 'po-mo' or postmodernism and two names sort of symbolised such heretical thought – Foucault ('Phuko') and Derrida ('Deri-da'). What I am trying to explain here is not so much what Foucault or Derrida wrote or what 'postmodernism' actually stood for but rather how they were culturally received in Bengal during this time. The intellectual world of Kolkata was witnessing something like a wave of new terms and names—*discourse, text, death of the author, construction, deconstruction, post-colonialism, postmodernism,* etc.—that were perceived as a threat to an existing order. This existing order consisted of both Marxist ideas and terms such as mode of production, base-super structure, primacy of the economic over culture, etc as well as a conservative empiricist style of doing history where the historian was supposed to go to the archive without any preconceived theory and re-create the past in the same way a judge gives a verdict on a particular case. Our class room and the main business of examination and degree were kept completely sanitized from such heretical thoughts. For example in our classes on History of Political Thought, Quentin Skinner[19] was taught but not Michel Foucault[20]. Only a few of the faculty members chose to discuss such names or ideas but more as additional knowledge to the main course that we were offered, more outside the class room than inside. But what was surprising was that some of the outstanding faculty members, irrespective of their ideological position, also showed an aversion to such new ideas and chose not to engage with them at all. This was dismissed as current 'fashion' largely influenced by American Universities. It would also be a mistake to think that Marx was heavily taught in the class. The political thought of Marx was part of the syllabus on Political Thought but it came right at the end of the syllabus and was taught in a hurry while the maximum time was taken up by liberal thinkers of England such as Hume and Burke. In other words, it would be a mistake to think that the MA course heavily focused on introducing Marxist thought to the students and avoided non-Marxist thinkers like Foucault. Rather the syllabus focused on empirical History which avoided theoretical discussions.

Within the discipline of History, the divide was expressed in terms of one's position regarding Subaltern Studies. Subaltern Studies represented a body of scholarship that was influenced by these new ideas and therefore were looked at with skepticism. The attitude towards such ideas also defined the border lines between an institution like Calcutta University and an institution like Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, which was closer to the new ideas. It is also true that on the whole the latter was further away from the Left Front establishment than University of Calcutta. Generally speaking, the new ideas achieved a fair amount of popularity by mid-90s and Foucault and Derrida became the new intellectual icons

of the time, to some extent replacing Marxist intellectual icons of the earlier era. The highpoint of this transformation was Jacques Derrida's arrival in Calcutta Book Fair as the Chief Guest in 1997. I remember *Of Grammatology*,[21] a difficult philosophical work, selling like hot cakes in College Street. The fact that there was a Bengali connection—the book was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—added an extra dimension to the sale of the book. There was certainly also an element of Bengali pseudo-intellectualism ('antlami') associated with such name-dropping. When *Of Grammatology* was selling like hot cakes I remember asking a friend's father who was a Professor of Philosophy, what Derrida's ideas were. He said politely that he was still trying to understand as his ideas were quite new and difficult to comprehend. This assured me that I was not the only person who was unable to make sense whereas there were plenty of people around who behaved as if they had no problem in understanding Derrida.

Ritualised Marxism

The conservatism that I saw in Calcutta University got reflected in other areas as well. By 1996, West Bengal under Jyoti Basu and Kerala under E.M.S. Namboodiripad were following two different trajectories. A few years before he passed away EMS led what is definitely the finest achievement of the democratic Left in India – the people's plan movement.[22] Jyoti Basu on the other hand, although pioneering Panchayati Raj in India in 1978, this time failed to move ahead with the same dedication and revolutionary spirit that EMS showed. The Left in Bengal was not sure which way to go and turned conservative. The Bengali intellectuals of the Left Front failed to give any direction to the party in its hour of intellectual crisis.

In 1996 I was not aware of the people's plan of Kerala, but we got a taste of CPI(M)'s conservativeness in different ways. This conservative attitude and suspicion for change was reflected in CPI(M)'s approach to decentralisation which was done in a halfhearted manner, in the case of computerisation which was initially considered bad, but also in certain bizarre ways. For example, one of the defining incidents during our college days (I cannot remember the exact date) was an incident which took place in Asutosh College when a *bhadralok* Marxist Principal told a

female student to come to college wearing a sari and not salwar-kameez. To wear a sari was to dress in the traditional Bengali style whereas salwar-kameez was not considered appropriate for a Bengali girl. This incident was not a stand-alone case. There were many such cases of '*dada*s' and '*didi*s' of the party directing the younger comrades as to how they should lead their love life, whether they should smoke a cigarette or not and what kind of clothes they should wear. Such forms of conservatism made many alienated from the Leftist student unions. Their absolute number was still small and therefore neither in student elections nor in general elections it had any impact, but the appeal of the Left parties did not grow during this period.

Operation Sunshine

I managed to get my MA degree in 1996, the official result coming out a few months later than it should have been. It was also the year in which Left Front in West Bengal initiated Operation Sunshine.[23] Because of the industrial decline of West Bengal,[24] and the state Government's failure to build Public Sector Units of its own, the informal sector of the economy had grown at the expense of the formal sector. One of the ways in which the unemployed found a source of livelihood was by retailing goods on the streets and the pavements of Kolkata. When CPI(M) was out of power, it was a friend of these hawkers, but in 1996 the Left Government demolished the stalls created by the hawkers selling their goods. It is true that illegal occupation of the pavements had become a serious problem in places like Gariahat which I used to walk by quite often. There was some logic in trying to reduce their concentration. However, this rationalisation could have been done through participatory discussions and by carefully examining the cases of those who were truly in need of livelihood solutions. But the Government chose to demolish the stalls arrogantly. Left Front Government was keen to show private investors a glossy urbanscape following the initiation of the new industrial policy in 1994. The move however backfired. Thirty-two hawker unions came together outside the banner of CITU (the trade union close to CPI(M) and formed the Hawker Sangram Committee and successfully resisted the onslaught against the hawkers.

By the middle of the 90s, when Operation Sunshine took place, in a complex way Bengal was in a state of crisis. Perhaps 'crisis' is a melodramatic term and indeed it perhaps does not quite explain the situation. It may be better to think in terms of a slow but nagging disease that does not send you to the death-bed but nonetheless does not make you feel healthy either. A sense of decline, a sense of things not quite the way it should be became common. Marx was not overthrown as in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe but Marxism was reduced to a set of well-orchestrated rituals such as holding massive rallies at the Brigade parade ground which showed the organisational capacity of CPI(M) rather than popular faith in Marx. In fact this ritualisation of the word 'michil' was well-captured in a joke that had become quite popular. It is difficult to explain this joke in English, much of the flavour is indeed lost in translation, but nonetheless it is as follows. Jyoti Basu received a letter from Gorbachev saying that he would like to visit Bengal where he has heard that Marxism is still very popular. Basu became slightly worried and called his able lieutenant Subhash Chakraborty, who was famous for organizing massive rallies. Subhash touched Jyoti Babu's feet and said there will be no problem when Gorbachev comes. So when Gorbachev came he saw a sea of humanity at the Brigade Parade Ground. He was of course impressed but then he was also curious and therefore he decided to go down from the dais and talk to the people. So he went down and asked via an interpreter 'what has brought you here?' He was astounded when he heard the people reply 'Marxbaad' (Marxism). He saluted Jyoti Basu and left. After he left, Basu called Subhash and asked, 'Subhash what happened? All the people said that they came here for Marxism! How did you manufacture that?' Subhash explained with a smile that actually they were all promised Rice and Fish, that is, 'Maach-bhaat' which Gorbachev heard as 'Marxbaad'. Basu shook Subhash's hand and blessed him. This was of course nothing more than a joke, but it reflected a social reality – such rallies and processions were carefully managed rather than the outcome of spontaneous participation of people in a Marxist cause.

The second element of ritualisation was something that Bengal became famous for—*bandh*s (shutdown). A 'Hartaal'(strike) was once upon a time a revolutionary weapon and it took great courage to implement one especially against the British Raj. Now it became a perfect excuse for a long week-end. So a *bandh* would be called invariably either on a Monday or a Friday so that it would become a grand success as all office goers would volunteer to take leave from office and then it would be proudly claimed that the bandh has been fully successful and the people of the state have fully supported it.

Along with this Bengal suffered from a serious crisis of icons. Uttam Kumar passed away in the 80s and Bengali cinema, once a source of pride, declined in technical quality and content. Satyajit Ray passed away in 1992. Noted playwright and actor Utpal Dutt passed away in 1993. Another legendary theatre personality Sambhu Mitra passed away in 1997. Mrinal Sen was alive, but his films had taken an inward, introspective turn exploring themes like loneliness and loss of meaning in life.[25] This was a far cry from his earlier avant-garde revolutionary films. The last few films of Satyajit Ray, although poor in technical quality, harped on a sense of decline in values and rottenness in society.[26]

Two novels published during the 90s captured this slow disease like situation in two different ways. Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Prothom Alo*[27] (*First Light*) took its readers back to the days of the Bengal Renaissance precisely at a point in time when that sense of Bengal's superiority was under threat. The second was the radical novel of Nabarun Bhattacharyya, *Herbert*,[28] which was a cult novel of sorts for me and my friends and many others in my generation. *Herbert* is a novel that is difficult to summarise as the charm of the novel is as much in the prose as it is in the plot. The protagonist, Herbert, a social loser and outsider, who becomes a fortuneteller and starts a business of invoking the ghosts. He is then attacked by rationalists of the sorts who were associated with the Left movement, and he is forced to commit suicide. But as the bed with his body is pushed into the pyre there is a huge explosion as once upon a time some bombs made by revolutionaries were kept hidden inside that bed. The bizarre ultimately triumphed over the rational. Bhattacharyya followed up *Herbert* with stories of a set of bizarre creatures called *Fyataru,* who attacks different cherished aspects of Bengali life, including the Book Fair. Bhattacharyya's anarchist characters were symptomatic of a time which was trying to break free from a sense of moribund staleness and an oppressive sense of political calmness. An important element of Nabarun Bhattacharyya's personality was

his *khisti* (use of foul language) that sought to shock the sensibilities of the Bengali bhadralok parlance. Yet he was also symptomatic of his time in the sense that his work was not able to project any road ahead or conjure new dreams. Perhaps this was not his intention either, he was not trying to do what Nikolai Ostrovsky did in case of *How the Steel Was Tempered*[29]; he was rather trying to shock, trying to lampoon and critique.

In this situation of a society trying to find its way, Bengal's pride was saved firstly by the Nobel Prize for Amartya Sen in 1998 and even more importantly by the rise of Sourav Ganguly[30] as a star cricketer. While Sen's ideas had very little impact on Government of West Bengal, his Nobel Prize once again gave Bengal the opportunity to bask in the glory of Bengal's intellectual greatness vis-à-vis rest of India. But it was the '*dadagiri*'[31] of Sourav Ganguly in the cricket field that captured the imagination of Bengalis cutting across all sections of the society. In this celebration 'dadagiri' one can perhaps find a society desperately trying to find its source of pride, precisely at a point in time when land reform, panchayati raj and the red flag were all beginning to look like old newspaper as Bangalore was emerging as the IT hub and Bombay was already the commercial capital of India.

Local Religious Sects

Towards the middle of the 90s, when I was finishing my MA, there was a sense in the air that BJP would be growing in West Bengal like elsewhere in India and would soon replace Congress as the principal opposition party. It was believed that since BJP is also a cadre based party it is more likely to become the most important party in West Bengal after CPI(M) in the near future. Congress was in fact going from bad to worse. It was split into several camps. The Party lacked any definite agenda, did not know what it stood for and why it was opposing CPI(M). The rock bottom for the party was reached when a highly energetic female leader named Mamata Banerjee, split the party and created Trinamool Congress in 1998.[32] For a while it seemed that while Congress was going down the drain, BJP would be able to rise. This however did not happen. Partly this was the organisational failure of BJP as they

failed to capitalize on the dormant communalism of Bengal but it was also the credit of CPI(M) that they ensured that BJP did not manage to grow as a cadre based party in the villages. During the 90s this was probably the biggest achievement of Jyoti Basu's CPI(M) in Bengal. There was very little left in terms of Marxism–Leninism as Jyoti Basu initiated the new industrial policy and Operation Sunshine, but CPI(M) did ensure that BJP did not succeed in West Bengal.

However, apart from the opposition of CPI(M) and the organisational weakness of BJP, there was another factor. Bengalis, including our family, had a low regard for the North Indians and BJP's *hindutva* was a very north Indian kind of Hinduism. It lacked the sophistication of Vivekananda or even Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. The Bajrangdal and the Viswa Hindu Parishad and the leaders like Saddhvi Rithambara were uncultured brutes in Bengali terms. This also prevented BJP from making inroads into Bengal. They did pick up the important issue of infiltration across the border but were not able to gain much in terms of electoral victory.

The failure of BJP to become a potent political force does not however mean that we were surrounded by secularism and religion was unimportant. Indeed, a certain kind of Bengali Hinduism was on the rise during the 90s, which CPI(M) did not try to or failed to combat. The Kalighat, Dakshineswar and Tarakeshwar temples remained ever popular. So did the Rama Krishna Mission and ISKON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). Along with this there was the rise of certain peculiarly Bengali Hindu saints. For example, Bijaygarh in South Kolkata, a former refugee colony, was a Left-bastion. But it was also famous for the ashram of a certain Ram Thakur. I lived for several years quite close to this ashram and therefore was able to see it from close quarters. Like the Rama Kirshna Mission it was impeccably clean (unlike Tarakesahwar for example), revolved around the ideas of an austere saintly figure. Almost every evening there used to be *kirtan* in the ashram which was of reasonably good quality. The ashram was however different from Rama Krishna Mission in the sense that it had a particularly local feel; it was intimately related to the life and times of the people of Jadavpur-Bijaygarh area.

The second important Thakur in Bengal was Anukul Thakur who had at least one major writer, Sirsendu Mukhopadhyay, as his follower. Anukul Thakur's head quarters is in Deoghar in Bihar

but had a significant number of followers in Bengal. The most important of these religious saints was perhaps Baba Loknath. Loknath is supposed to have lived for 160 years and supposedly had visited Mecca several times. In course of the 90s, along with Coca Cola and Pepsi, we found massive spread of Baba Loknath's name all around us. There were Loknath Stores selling school exercise books named after Baba Loknath. There were cycle rickshaws that were dedicated to Baba Loknath, small businesses named after him, not to mention the ubiquitous image of the grim and austere saint just about everywhere. Loknath's slogan—wherever you want me I shall be there—became immensely popular.

However, the strangest of them all was Balak Bramhachari.[33] Balak Brahmachari was the leader of a sect known as Santaan dal (literally the children's army) who also had a political outfit known as *Aamraa Bangali* (we the Bengalis). In 1993 following the death of Balak Brahmachari there was a huge controversy as his followers refused to either cremate or bury their leader's body as they did not believe that he had died. Local newspapers, such as *Aajkaal*, made a big issue out of the fact that the government was doing nothing to ensure that the body was cremated. The stand-off continued for almost a month as the dead body lay in ice-slabs. It was alleged that CPI(M) was not taking any action as they feared alienating a substantial vote bank in the coming rural local government election which was to be held in May 1993. On 25 June, fifty one days after the death the Health Department set up a medical team to inspect the body and give a report to the Government. The medical team was however not allowed to look at the body and had to return. Finally, on June 30, under the supervision of CPI(M) leader Subhash Chakraborty, police stormed the Santaan Dal headquarters and cremated the body. Chakraborty took great pride in the success of the operation after nearly two months and said that the operation was more difficult than the one Dharmendra, famous Bollywood actor, had to do in the film *Jugnu*.[34]

Along with the growing popularity of religious sects and prophets there was also an explosion of small street corner temples usually dedicated to God *Shani*. It is not unusual to find in Kolkata big trees at the corner of a street. So firstly a small idol would be placed in one such tree. This would then be followed by a small prayer session every Saturday. As a next step a small temple structure would

be created and a much larger ritual would be observed sometimes occupying a part of the street. One worshipper (*purutmoshai*) would start coming regularly to conduct the pujas every Saturday, giving *bhog* and *prasad* to the devotees. Thus every Saturday the street corner would be jammed and taken over for Shani pujo.

While these were developments peculiar to the Bengali society, a landmark was created by the Birlas in the Ballygunje area of south Kolkata. This massive temple made of marble was initiated in 1970, and was finished and opened to public in 1996. The temple was much more than a temple dedicated to Radha and Krishna or a brilliant piece of architecture. It became a symbol of Marwari might in the city. By this time commercial capital was almost completely in the hand of non-Bengalis, popularly known as Marwaris. The Birla temple stood as the symbol of their economic supremacy.

The Aura of Jyoti Basu

In 1996 while Bengali pride took a small beating with the inauguration of the Birla temple at Ballygunje, it took a big blow when Jyoti Basu could not become the Prime Minister of India[35]. He had emerged as the consensus candidate for the Prime Minister of the United Front Government, but due to reasons that remains a mystery, CPI(M) took the decision of not joining the government and hence Basu could not become the Prime Minister. Why the Politburo failed to see the obvious advantage of having a Prime Minister from its own Party at a point in time when globally the Left was on the back foot is incomprehensible to say the least. There were of course some official explanation but hardly anyone bought the argument. The unofficial explanation going round in Bengal was that the non-Bengali, especially Kerala lobby within the Party, did not want a person from Bengal to become the Prime Minister and therefore give the upper hand to the Bengal lobby within the Party. The truth of course is waiting for its historian but the perception was certainly strong in Bengal. For once even the anti-Left newspapers were expressing their shock and disbelief regarding this incident. Basu later described the incident as a 'historic blunder'.

In spite of this loss for Bengal, Basu ruled Bengal all through the 90s with an aura that may be inconceivable today. For supporters

of CPI(M), like many in my family, he was the great patriarch who could do no wrong. He ensured that the party remained invincible in Bengal in spite of the BJP wave and the collapse of the Soviet Union. His personal popularity remained intact in rural Bengal and he began winning middle-class sentiments through the new industrial policy. The aura of Jyoti Basu is perhaps best explained by the way he was able to get away with outrageous comments. In 1990 in the infamous Bantala case one UNICEF lady officer and two lady officers from the Health Department were raped and one of them was killed. The incident happened in broad daylight. Basu, when asked by the press, dismissed the issue by saying that such incidents of hooliganism do happen but that does not mean that the law and order situation of the state was bad and after all the culprits were put behind bars.[36] At another time, with someone else making this comment, it would have had dramatic repercussions. Not with Basu. He was neither a very friendly looking person nor a media savvy person. He was hardly ever seen to be smiling in front of the camera. It was common to see on the TV screen Basu coming out of his chamber at Writers Buildings, walking away briskly and the media persons chasing after him—a far cry from the days of political leaders coming to the studio of media houses to give interviews. As a speaker also he was not brilliant but in public rallies he managed to speak the common man's language in a casual conversational style. However an important element of his style also was his impeccable white Dhoti and Panjabi, which made him appear as an impeccable Bengali bhadralok. Indeed he was popularly known as 'Jyoti-*babu*' rather than Comrade Jyoti Basu. In a period of uncertainty for the Left Front following the fall of Soviet Union his style exuded a certain arrogant self-confidence that was very much held in awe during this time even by his opposition. Another crucial element of his style was the projection of a pragmatic and practical personality rather than the image of a Marxist revolutionary. Whether this was true or not, he always gave the impression that he knew exactly what he wanted and how to achieve what he wanted. The successive electoral victories throughout the decade further increased his aura. Even some negative rumours and allegations about his son, a businessman, were not capable of tarnishing his image. There were jokes against him, such as the one which said that his period has seen the emergence of Nandan (a film complex for showing art films) and Chandan (his son) – but that could hardly have an impact on his massive popularity. The opposition continued to make allegations of electoral mal-practices ('rigging') which were never proved beyond doubt.

Basu's pragmatic, managerial style in fact became the style of CPI(M) in Bengal. While CPI(M) in Delhi or in JNU campus would talk about capitalism and other complex theoretical terms, CPI(M) in Bengal preferred to show off its managerial competence in keeping the Front together, maintaining its mass base and winning elections. Leaders such as Anil Biswas and Subhas Chakraborty prided themselves in their managerial capacity rather than in their knowledge of Marxist theory. The typical CPI(M) man in Bengal was therefore a Bengali and an efficient manager of local situations rather than a firebrand revolutionary or a brilliant theoretician. Typically he or she (usually he) was simple in his/her attire, free of any charge of financial corruption and of course hundred per cent dedicated to the Party. In their mental world there were two kinds of people – those who were supporters of the Party and those who were not – the '*amra*' (us) and the '*ora*' (them). The world was not divided between the bourgeois and the proletariat but among those who were for CPI(M) and against CPI(M). Party identity overshadowed class identities.

The most important task of the CPI(M) that Jyoti Basu and Anil Biswas created in the 90s was to preserve the power of the Party and to ensure that the Left did not lose in Bengal. The anxiety to preserve Left power following the fall of Soviet Union is understandable. This however had its price. Basu and his party men, in their anxiety to preserve the political supremacy of the Left Front, ignored the increasing number of self-seekers who wanted to come close to the Party to gain something rather than to push the agenda of rural transformation which was initiated in the seventies and eighties. *Party kora* (party work) acquired a whole new meaning—it meant staying close to the Party to get personal benefits—jobs, contracts, promotions, etc. As long as somebody was useful for preserving the electoral hegemony of the Party, all blemishes were ignored. On the other hand, anybody who was not 'us' was treated with suspicion—even if he was a brilliant scholar or writer. Thus slowly many brilliant scholars left Calcutta University over the years. However more important than some scholars leaving for other

academic institutions was the psychological transformation of the CPI(M) member/sympathiser into a careful self-seeker rather than an idealistic revolutionary. This change was all around us and was brilliantly captured by Suman Mukhopadhyay later in his film version of *Herbert*[37] (the novel by Nabarun Bhattacharyya I discussed earlier). A character in the film is shown at one point to introduce John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*[38] to young Herbert. Later he got a Government job as a teacher and was ready to leave the old dilapidated ancestral house for greener pastures. As he was getting into the car Herbert points out to him that he was leaving behind the book. He took a look at the book with disdain and told him that it is no more of any use to him and Herbert may keep it.

Inside Writers' Buildings

When Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee succeeded Jyoti Basu as the Chief Minister in 2000, a slogan of his that became quite famous was 'do it now'. This was an attempt on his part to change the work culture of Bengal, especially of the employees working in the Government, who were notorious for their inefficiency. He tried to argue that the new Bengal that he envisioned would require a radically different work culture if the image of Bengal in the outside world would have to be changed.

A couple of years earlier, I had a chance to work inside the Writers' Buildings, the seat of power in Bengal, for about a year. I was trying to do a PhD in History and therefore had to visit the West Bengal State Archives. The Archives for the twentieth century was located inside the Writers' Buildings. My first experience was that of standing in a queue in front of the gate through which the common masses entered Writers'. There were other gates of course, which were meant for senior officials and Ministers and may be for high profile visitors. We had to fill up a pass, get it signed by a police officer sitting at the gate, enter through the metal detector and then find our way inside. As I was filling up the pass I asked a young police officer sitting in front of me, 'Do you know where the State Archive is located?' He was a nice gentleman, quite a sober looking one. The officer replied, 'You know, a lot of people ask me this question. When you find it, could you please let me know?' I

went inside and found myself in a maze. It took me close to an hour to find out where exactly the Archive was. It was a surprisingly small little door through which I had to enter, and then found myself in front of another door, through which I went in and found three women sitting in a cramped room packed with oversized tables and shelves full of dusty files. I had to show my identity papers to them and then they pointed out another door ahead of that room, through which I went in and found myself in another small cramped room where none of the windows could be opened and the air conditioner did not work properly. There was an old dusty bound book that gave the details of the types of files that were preserved in the Archives. There was a distinct lack of enthusiasm in the body language of the three ladies about the entry of a rookie researcher. I had to visit some other official also through a small narrow corridor, where frail old men stooped over old type-writers. It is possible that the type-writers were at least thirty years old and computers were conspicuous by their absence. The walls were damp and I could feel that rats are having a good time inside the Archives.

Located not far away from the Archives was the main library of the Writers'. When I visited it seemed that it is rarely visited by any of the civil servants for whom the library was created perhaps during the British period. The catalogue was yet to be computerized and was lagging behind by many years. Hardly the kind of place one could feel proud of, especially after spending a year at the India Office Library in capitalist London.

The unofficial working hours of the Archive was 11:00 am to 4:00 pm with a lunch period thrown in the middle. Getting one's work done depended on the relationship one could build with the people working in the Archive. Even after trying to be as polite and nice as possible it was not unusual for an entire day to be wasted because the particular person who is supposed to look after a particular section of the shelves from where files are to be brought was on leave. No one else was allowed to do the job for him. If I tried to volunteer that was also not permitted. On the other hand if some famous scholar was coming to the Archive then he had the privilege of giving a call to the Archive and got his files deposited on the table before he reached so that he didn't need to waste his time. It was particularly painful to go to the toilets. They produced a foul smell that one could only absorb by closing one's nose while

urinating.

Sometimes, while trying to cope with my research related frustrations, I wandered around the Writers'. I could see in front of me a series of stair cases made of steel that has been added after the main building was built. One could take one of these staircases and keep walking through the corridors and see the rooms inside. The rooms for the ordinary employees were invariably overcrowded and some of the tables spilled out into the corridors. There were hundreds of people constantly walking in and walking out, tea sellers doing brisk business. In fact the Writers was a mini shopping complex as well as there were many stalls selling honey, garments and various other commodities which I do not remember very well. In the canteen, food was cheap but the clerks preferred to open their multi-tier tiffin boxes and enjoy a good Bengali meal. Along with this of course were several posters and wall-writings, all claiming that various forms of struggle would continue.

Having spent a year inside the Writers' the question that came to my mind was not the usual one, 'why is it that Bengali babus don't work?' but rather 'how is it that some people actually manage to work in such conditions?' I am not sure whether any Marxist theoretician has bothered to think about interior design of the offices of a socialist/communist state. At least I have not read any. Marxism is usually bothered about certain grand themes – crisis of capitalism, dialectical nature of historical progress, false consciousness etc. How to create nice, airy offices of a socialist state that also has clean toilets is perhaps not the kind of problem that a Marxist intellectual aspires to solve. I cannot come to a conclusion as I have never been to the Kremlin or had the opportunity to walk in the corridors of power at Beijing or Havana. But I can say for sure that this has never been a problem for a Bengali intellectual, Marxist or otherwise. All I can say is that between 1998 when I first visited Writers' and 2011, I have visited all districts of West Bengal and have seen at least one hundred buildings where government employees work—Gram Panchayats, Block Offices, Zila Parishads, District Magistrates Offices, and the questions has remained the same—*how can people work in these offices without falling into depression?* Barring the chambers of the Ministers, *Sabhadhipatis*[39] and the IAS officers, the rest of the offices are usually unfit for human habitation. They are perfectly built for depression induced laziness.

The Broken Mirror

Let me try to summarise the argument made in this chapter. If one looks at West Bengal during the 90s through the lens of electoral politics, then one would see a state ruled by a communist party that remained unchallenged in spite of the fall of the Soviet Union and the introduction of liberalisation policies in India. This may give the impression that Bengal during this time whole heartedly supported socialism and, therefore, chose to support a communist party in power led by the charismatic leader, Jyoti Basu. The red flag was flying high in the state thereby indicating that communism/socialism was very popular in the state.

The reality was much more complex and I have tried to portray it in my analysis. There was very little connection between the CPI(M) of the 90s and Marxism as a revolutionary ideology of the working class. By 1994, CPI(M) had initiated a new industrial policy which was sought to take advantage of the liberalisation of the economy by inviting private capital into the state. It unleashed the Operation Sunshine on hawkers who earned their livelihood by selling goods on the pavement. The party benefited from the absence of a strong opposition and was able to project itself as the only party that can offer stability.

I have tried to show that the urban society was in many ways changing rapidly and in contradictory ways. In the intellectual world, new radical ideas, popularly known as 'postmodernism' and new intellectual stars like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were threatening the position of Marxist thinkers and certain well-established Marxist theories of the previous decades such as base-superstructure or mode of production. The Left establishment was not able to come up with creative engagements with such new ideas and therefore treated such ideas as heretical. Outside the intellectual space, consumerism, satellite television, magazines for women, beauty contests, increasing interest in stock market, etc were opening up spaces where the Marxist way of life of an earlier era was threatened. The important literary and cultural works of the period were also not espousing Marxism-Leninism or pro-communist views. While CPI(M) managed to control the rise of BJP's *hindutva*, certain forms of Bengali Hindu religion continued to flourish and CPI(M) could not stop them. In the process two things happened. Firstly,

CPI(M) adjusted itself to a society that was not terribly interested in Marxism as an ideology and therefore moved towards wooing private capital on the one hand and stopped trying to transform the society along Marxist lines on the other. The second was that it tolerated deviation within the party and allowed opportunists to enter as long as that helped the party to stay in power. Thus once again, it was less important to know Marxism or to fight for Marxist causes rather than to show loyalty towards the party.

I have also tried to argue that Bengal during this time went through a sense of 'decline', of losing out in the liberalisation race, of being victimised, be it in the case of Jyoti Basu's bid for Prime Minister or the numerous occasions when Saurav Ganguly was supposedly 'cheated'. The rise of new urban centres like Bangalore and out-migration of middle class educated youth from Calcutta added to this sense of loss and of Bengal falling behind/cheated. Internally also there was a sense of losing out to the 'Marwaris'.

However if the official Marxism was not able to inspire much, Bengal did not turn ideologically capitalist during this time either. Yes, there was greater interest in making money, greater interest in consumerism and intellectually greater interest in new forms of radical thought, but there was no conscious theoretical acceptance of capitalism. Rather Bengali society was split like a broken mirror. Some were simply followers of CPI(M), irrespective of their policies; a very small group still nurtured Naxalite dreams; some argued from a Bengali nationalist position that we must industrialise to regain our lead in India, some were blindly anti-CPI(M), some thought Bengalis do better outside Bengal but are lazy in their own state and therefore the state will never develop, some felt that Bengalis were constantly cheated by the Government of India and other regions of India. Such ambiguous and sometimes self-contradictory sentiments made up the Bengal of the 90s, rather than clear ideological positions.

Notes and References

[1] Mimi White, 'Site Unseen: An Analysis of CNN's War in the Gulf', in Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz (eds), *Seeing Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1994.

[2] Santa Barbara was first aired in the United States on 30 July, 1984 and last aired on 15 January, 1993. The serial was co-produced by NBC and Dobson Productions. In India it was aired by Star TV between 1993 and 1997.

[3] The Bold and the Beautiful was produced by Bell-Philip Production and first aired on 23 March, 1987 in CBS channel. In India it was first aired in 1991.

[4] Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous was first aired in United States on 31 March, 1984 and continued till 2 September, 1995.

[5] Baywatch was first aired in the US on NBC channel in 1989 and continued till 1999.

[6] The Phil Donahue Show first screened on US national television in 1970 and continued till 1996.

[7] The Oprah Winfrey Show was first aired in US television in 1986 and continued till 2011. It is the highest ranking talk show in American TV history.

[8] Coca Cola made its official re-entry in India on 24 October, 1993.

[9] PepsiCo entered Indian market in 1988 through a joint venture. It was initially known as Lehar Pepsi. After liberalisation in 1991, it bought its partner companies and came to be known as Pepsi.

[10] MTV was launched in India in 1996 as MTV India.

[11] Kaun Banega Crorepati was first aired on Indian TV in 2000. It was produced by Big Synergy Productions. It was originally aired on Star Plus and later on Sony TV.

[12] Who Want to Be a Millionaire was first aired in the UK on September 4, 1998.

[13] Tero Parban was first aired on Doordarshan in 1987.

[14] Miss Universe is an international beauty contest held annually in different parts of the world, and run by the Miss Universe Organisation. The first contest was held in California in 1952.

[15] Miss World is an international beauty contest organised by the Miss World Organisation. It started in 1951. It was started by Eric Morley in the UK.

[16] Sananda is a magazine for women started in 1986 by ABP Private Limited which is the largest media house in Eastern India.

[17] Sananda Tilottama beauty contest was started in 1997. It is the largest beauty contest in Eastern India. Contestants usually come from Calcutta and Guwahati.

[18] For a discussion on Left Front and Calcutta University, see, Santosh Bhattacharya, *Red Hammer over Calcutta University (1984–1987)*, New Statesman Publishing Co., Kolkata, 2007.

[19] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vols 1 & 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978.

[20] Books by Foucault as well as books on him were introduced to me outside the class room by my teacher, Professor Dhruba Gupta. Books such as *Power/ Knowledge and Discipline* and *Punish* were available at the departmental library, but not taught in class.

[21] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.

[22] Thomas Isaac and Richard Franke, *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala*, Leftword Books, New Delhi, 2000.

[23] See Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, 'Archiving from Below: The Case of Mobilised Hawkers in Calcutta', *Sociological Research Online*, 14 (5): 7, November 30, 2009; Subhas Chakraborty, Manindra Banerjee and Shankar Mukherjee, *Operation Sunshine*, Viswakos Parishad, Calcutta, 1997.

[24] See Ranajit Roy, *The Agony of West Bengal*, New Age Publishers, Calcutta, 1973; Ross Malik, *Development Policy of a Communist Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993; Biswanath Ray (ed.) *West Bengal Today: A Fresh Look*, Mittal Publishers, New Delhi, 1993; Aseema Sinha, *Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2005; Debdas Banerjee, 'Indian Industrial Growth and Corporate Sector Behaviour in West Bengal 1947–1997', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (47–48), Nov 21, 1998.; Abhijit Banerjee, Ashok Sanjay Guha, Kaushik Basu, Maitreesh Ghatak, Mrinal Dutta Chaudhuri and Pranab Bardhan, 'Stategy for Economic Reform in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 (41), October 12, 2002.

[25] See films like *Ek Din Achanak* (1989), *Mahaprithivi* (1992), *Antareen* (1994). For books on Mrinal Sen, see Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, *The Maverick Maestro, Mrinal Sen*, Indus, New Delhi, 1995; Sumita S. Chakravarty, *The Enemy Within: The Films of Mrinal Sen*, Flicks Books, Trowbridge, 2000; John W. Hood, *Chasing the Truth: The Films of Mrinal Sen*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993.

[26] See *Ganashatru* (1990), *Shakha Prashakha* (1992) and *Aguntuk* (1992). For scholarly work on Satyajit Ray, see Charles Tesson, *Satyajit Ray*, Editions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du cineìma : Diffusion Seuil, Paris, 1992; Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000; Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray, National Book Trust*, New Delhi, 1994; Keya Ganguly, *Cinema, Emergence and the Films of Satyajit Ray*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2010; John W. Hood, *Beyond the World of Apu: The Films of Satyajit Ray*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2008; Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*: *The Biography of a Master Filmmaker*, I.B. Tauris & Co., London, 2006.

[27] Sunil Gangopadhay, *Prothom Alo, parts 1 & 2*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1996, 1997; Sunil Gangopadhyay, *First Light*, translated by Aruna Chakravarti, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2001.

[28] Nabarun Bhattacharyya, *Harbart*, Deys Publishers, Calcutta, 1994; Nabarun Bhattacharyya, *Harbart*, translated by Arunanva Sinha, Tranquebar Press, Chennai, 2011.

[29] See Chapter 1.

[30] See Debashish Datta, *Sourav Ganguly, the Maharaja of Cricket*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2007; Amrita Daityari, *Sourav Ganguly: The Fire Within*, Rupa and Co., New Delhi, 2003; Gulu Ezekiel, *Sourav Ganguly: A Biography*, Penguin Books, New York, 2003.

[31] *Dadagiri* is a colloquial Bengali term which roughly refers to a man's heroism or bravado. Ganguly was the anchor of a television quiz show for children which was called Dadagiri.

[32] Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (14–15), April 3, 2004; Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography*, Harper Collins, New Delhi, 2012.

[33] Partha Chatterjee, 'Democracy and the Violence of the State: A Political Negotiation of Death', in Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and the Nation: Selected Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010. The essay was first published in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2 (1), 2001.

[34] Jugnu was directed by Pramod Chakravorthy and released on 30 August 1973. It starred popular Bollywood actors Dharmendra and Hema Malini.

[35] Surabhi Bandyopadhyay, *Jyoti Basu: The Authorized Biography*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1997; Jyoti Basu, *With the People: A political Memoir*, UBS Publishers, New Delhi, 1997; Ashok Dasgupta, *Jyoti Basu*, Aajkaal, Kolkata, 2001; Government of West Bengal, *Jyoti Basu Speaks: A Collection of Selected Speeches of Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister, West Bengal*, Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, 1992.

[36] 'Woman Official lynched in Calcutta', *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 1 June

1990. The incident however did not completely fade away from public memory and was deliberately re-kindled in public discourse in 2010–11 prior to the election of 2011. See D. Bandyopadhyay, 'Census of Political Murders in West Bengal during CPI-M rule 1977–2009', *Mainstream*, Vol XLVIII (34), August 14, 2010.

[37] Suman Mukhopadhay (director), *Herbert*, released in 2005.

[38] John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Boni and Liveright, New York, 1919.

[39] Sabhadhipati is the President of the Zila Parishad, the district level local government in West Bengal.

3

NGOs and the Left
Is a dialogue possible?

I am not sure exactly when I saw Ashutosh Gowariker's Bollywood flick, *Swades*, but it was probably around 2005. The film narrates the story of Mohan Bhargava, (played by Shah Rukh Khan), an accomplished scientist at NASA, who returns to India in search of his nanny, Kaveri *amma,* whom he wants to take back to the land of prosperity with him. This journey takes him to a remote village named Charanpur. There, he came across a childhood friend, Gita, who is dedicated to the education of the children of the village, and is in-charge of a local school.

As the story unfolds, Mohan becomes more and more attracted towards the work that Gita does and indeed towards Gita herself. His dream of taking Kaveri amma to US also does not work out. Kaveri amma says that it is not possible for her to go anywhere before Gita gets married and Gita was in no mood to get married. Love slowly blossoms between Gita and Mohan, and he develops the desire to do something for the village. It was not easy as the villagers fight amongst themselves, are uneducated and always blaming the government rather than assuming the responsibility of changing things on their own. Mohan, being a scientist, notices that the key to the transformation of the village is in electricity. He then talks to the villagers and forms a group of a 100 men, with whom he builds a hydro-power plant. The village is transformed and so is Mohan. He goes back to NASA, completes his project but is unable to forget Charanpur; resigns from his job and returns to his village and to the woman he fell in love with.

According to the entry on *Swades* in Wikipedia, Ashutosh

Gowariker was inspired by the story of an NRI couple who developed a pedal power generator to light up schools in remote villages without any electricity in the Narmada Valley. They were part of a team of activists from the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) movement and the People's School of Energy from Kerala.

There is no shortage of such heroic stories of people returning from abroad and doing something for rural India. There are also other variations of taking advantage of globalisation, by staying abroad but nonetheless doing something that changes the face of a village or many villages. I wish I could recall and write such a heroic narrative about myself. Instead, let me tell a story of fear, doubt, mistakes, survival, and some interesting experiments by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that I happened to see in West Bengal. After discussing them I shall take up the question as to whether they mean anything for Marxism, given the negative attitude that Marxists like Prakash Karat in India have shown towards the NGOs.

First Taste of Rural West Bengal

Unlike Mohan Bhargava, I didn't have a job in NASA. Nor did I have a bright career ahead of me when I decided to come back to India after a stint in the UK. There was nothing glorious about the situation I was in. My PhD thesis was stuck; I was running out of money. I did not know what trick I needed to play in order to secure more funding for my project. I was feeling low and confused. While roaming around aimlessly inside the SOAS library, I happened to see books that were opposing the new imperialism of USA, there were protest movements in London in favour of cancellation of the Third World debt, there were friends of Marxist disposition who were subconsciously an influence, so were the bookshops that sold old Marxist books. I was tired of the business-like atmosphere of academics.

It is in this state of confusion that I contacted a friend and expressed my desire to work with him in rural West Bengal in 1999. I returned home with the hope that I will finish my thesis and at the same time do some work in the villages. It is always a lot easier to think about going to a village than actually be in one. Till then the village had existed in me either in the form of literature or in the

form of academic books and papers that I had read as a student of Economic History at Calcutta University. There were new books as well, the most significant of them being *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*[1] by Robert Chambers, a book that is as fresh today as it was when it was first published. Such knowledge is useful in terms of providing certain analytical tools to understand rural poverty but it was another experience altogether to leave behind the signs of urban life, move away from metalled roads on to uneven broken *moram* roads and find oneself right in the middle of a village. This was a time when the mobile revolution had not hit India as yet and it was a somewhat eerie feeling to be in a place where there was no telephone. The eerie feeling got stronger as dusk approached and it was not possible for me initially to comfortably spend 24 hours in a village. Negotiating an entire night took some time.

The area that I am writing about is part of the Birbhum district of West Bengal, the same district where Rabindranath Tagore created Santiniketan and perhaps even more importantly Sriniketan—his experiment with rural reconstruction. Santiniketan has over the years grown into a middle-class university town, but Birbhum district has continued to remain one of the poorer districts of the state of West Bengal. The problems of inadequate irrigation to improve the soil condition has continued even at the turn of the century, and after nearly three decades of Left's rule in West Bengal, and Birbhum being one of the bastions of their power. The specific village that I am talking about was located on the Birbhum–Jharkhand border and mostly inhabited by the Santhal tribe although there are Scheduled Castes (SCs) as well. The SCs or other higher castes usually controlled the better quality land, which resulted in three crops, while the tribals were usually left with land that was not fertile.

All this was not as clear to me then as it is now. My approach to going to the village was amateurish; it neither had the rigour of an ethnographer nor the professionalism of a trained social worker. It was part youthful romanticism, part a naïve desire to do something good for my country, part stupidity and in part sheer fun. One of the unusual realisations that I had while making my initial visits to the rural world, and this is usually not discussed in development economics/studies classes, is that rural people are not in every way

worse off than people living in cities. To begin with, the air is lot cleaner and indeed one of the pleasures of going to the village was to get a taste of clean air. Second, the sheer beauty and greenery of the countryside was always a soothing experience. There could be other unexpected encounters. Once I reached the particular village on a Monday morning, eager to get going with the activities of the day and set the programme rolling. An old lady came with a jerrycan and asked me why I didn't come the previous three days. I explained that since there was a festival going on I saw no point in coming to the village as no work would be done during this time. Santhals usually do not do any work during this festival and especially the male folk spend their time enjoying their drink. The old lady looked at me in amazement and then almost ordered me to sit down. She then took a glass and poured a particular drink called *haria* (rice beer) from the jerrycan and told me to drink. After three and half glasses of it I had to lie down flat and then woke up only late in the afternoon.

Looking back, it was probably much more than a funny incident. I was too keen to do 'development' and forgot that I was also interacting with a certain society which had its own norms and culture. Hence, I should have been there participating in the rituals at their festival. It was of course not possible to become one of them but to focus on 'development' alone was probably a mistake. This gap between the way I thought and the way the tribal villagers thought became evident from my experience in trying to run a non-formal pre-primary education centre. My initial expectation from the villagers was that they would be delighted to know that there is now a school for their children, and that they would be happy to know that the teachers would be speaking in Santhali and not Bengali.

As it turned out, when we went around the villages talking to the residents, they were thinking that they would do us a favour by sending their children to school. Similarly, my expectation from the teachers initially was that they would be very keen on working for their own schools especially when they got a fairly decent honorarium—thanks to the donor support that we got but it turned out that we had to be constantly on the vigil of two young men who were supposed to be teachers in order to ensure that they performed their work on time. The third teacher was a woman,

and we thought that she would be more interested than others as the little children were very much like her own, but she turned out to be the worst of the lot. In one village there was a conflict between the two *para*s (neighbourhoods) of the village as to where the school would be located, and it was not possible to start the school for some time because of this problem. The particular village where I stayed for three months, a village named Garia, was populated by Santhals but was flanked on two sides by two powerful Scheduled Caste families. Although in official discourse Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are often pronounced together ("SC/ST") yet the gap between the two is actually quite significant, especially in West Bengal. Of the two, the one who was more powerful (let us call him Gobindo Mondol), had a huge, almost palatial house with a dish antenna peeking from the top. He was a school teacher by profession, had a ration shop and was close to the powerful people in the locality. He was also a dealmaker for land that the shady businessmen wanted to buy from the tribals. He combined all these with moneylending and hence was the perfect exploiter of the tribal families who lived in village Garia. They were dependent on him and he always had a patronising attitude towards the tribal families and explained to us many times that they wasted their money on alcohol, did not send their children to school, so on and so forth. A character like Gobindo Mondol was probably not unusual during the zamindari era in Bengal, but to find such a person in post-land reform West Bengal was indeed a revelation.

As I said earlier, I did not go to live in the village as a trained ethnographer, nor did I have an intention at that point of time to produce any 'village study' out of my stay in the village. However, after a few weeks, I felt that some sort of a document needs to be produced in order to explain the problem. The problem being faced by the tribals was not a simple one of absolute poverty. In due course of time I have seen many a villages in much deeper poverty than Garia and the surrounding villages. There was electricity; there was a primary school, source of clean drinking water, and at least some of the households were quite well-off. I did also carry out some interviews with 'key informants' regarding the problem of the people of the village. One of them was a *Majhi Haram,* or the traditional leader of the Santhal tribe. The traditional power of the *Majhi Haram* was long gone except for a certain amount of

additional respect perhaps. He was an old man who was lying in bed in the courtyard of his house. He explained to me that there was an all-round degeneration of the Santhal society. Old Santhali culture was gone, the songs were gone, the ritual dances were gone, health had deteriorated, there was too much alcohol, men and women did not wear traditional costumes anymore and there was too much Hindi film music among youth and all sorts of other vices. He sounded despondent and did not see any hope for their future.

I thought this was central to the problem that I saw. The old world of the Santhals was gone, their tribal solidarity and tribal knowledge system was breaking up. On the other hand, however, they were not able to master the new rules of the game—how to extract benefits from the government, how to use the Panchayat System to their advantage, how to influence the Block Office and get contracts, how to use new techniques of farming, etc. The SCs on the other hand had mastered these new rules of the game. This is why Gobindo Mondol was a school teacher, which gave a significant amount of cash income plus a social network, he had acquired the license of a ration shop and he knew enough people to be a successful land broker *(dalali)*.

Dalali in land was emerging as big business during this time. This was because the land of the region had granite stone underneath which is ideal for producing stone chips. Hence all over the region land was being bought at throw away price from the tribals and converted into stone quarries or open mines.

Along with the open mines, 'khadan' there were also 'kesar' or stone crushing units, which ran huge machines and created environmental pollution at an unimaginable scale. Vast tracts of green land were radically converted into nightmarish grey with stone dust clouding the sky. Safety standards were never followed.

In the days of the past, may be a century ago, the Santhals would have objected to such a destruction of nature. Now they were mostly quite happy to go and work in the *khadan* and in the *kesar*. There were at least three reasons behind it. The first was the fact that land was not fertile and the price of agricultural inputs was going up. Many of the tribals migrated during the rainy season to work as agricultural labourers, but did not have enough work in the other months. Second, the stone quarries and the crushers gave them ready cash and the lure of cash was growing, which could not be

compensated by food grains. Moreover, this supply of cash was fairly regular unlike the source of income in various government sponsored schemes. Finally, even though pollution was seriously hazardous to health in the long run, going out to work broke the monotony of village life, especially for women. Thus, it was impossible to make the tribals believe that they were losing their way of life, that there could be alternatives in the form of sustainable farming, and so forth. The organisation I was working in was also weak in terms of organising capacity and in coming up with viable alternatives. Hence, a few pre-primary teaching centres and a doctor's clinic once a month was all that could be implemented. The larger problem of changing the mind-set was not possible.

Similarly, attempts to convince the District Magistrate was a failure as the District Magistrate gave the excuse that Birbhum was a district where there was hardly any industry and it was not possible to stop the entry of industries as people themselves wanted to work there. Discussion with the leaders of CPI(M) also was not useful. They agreed that there was environmental pollution but also argued that stopping the industry would take away livelihoods of thousands of workers. Donor agencies such as ActionAid also did not take up any consistent position. So even though there were quite a few newspaper reports against the stone quarries, some of which were result of the advocacy work of NGOs, nothing much happened.

In the meantime,in 1999-2000, a network of NGOs was formed in Kolkata through ActionAid to participate in a nationwide agitation called Right to Food Campaign . Right to Food Campaign was initiated in India following the case of starvation deaths while there were foodstuffs rotting in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India. The campaign was initiated by a Public Interest Litigation by an activist organisation called People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL). The ActionAid partners in West Bengal headed by an NGO named Jana Sanhati Kendra (JSK) were requested by ActionAid to carry out a survey of local ration shops in their field areas. The idea was to see whether the claims made by the various state governments before the Supreme Court was correct or not. We carried out the survey in our area and I helped JSK as a volunteer to analyse the data and write a report.

The activities related to Right to Food and the opposition our organisation made to the sale of a particular land to an anti-social

element turned our organisation against Gobindo Mondol. One evening a member of another influential family of the village came and told me and my friends that there was a plan to kill us at night. It is not certain whether the information was correct or not. However, we felt that since the place where we lived was right at the edge of the village it was not difficult to throw a bomb at us and since the roof of the house was made of straw, it was not difficult to set fire to it either.

Three of us decided to leave quietly for a nearby village to stay with a Santhal farmer who had become a friend. We had to walk across paddy fields on a moonlit night and it was a strange, eerie feeling. We were not sure whether we would reach our destination and whether we would find shelter or not. Fortunately we found the person we were looking for and he was kind enough to give us shelter for the night when he heard what was going on. One of our education centres was also in fact located in this person's house.

We survived that tense night. After that there was a division in the organisation as to what we should be doing. I was of the opinion that the organisation is too small to get involved in such a battle, while the leader of our organisation thought differently. Sometime later I decided to leave as I was tired of the lack of clear thinking within the organisation's leadership. Instead of dying at the hands of anti-socials, I preferred to move on. Sometime later I got a job offer from an organisation called Swanirvar, which was a reputed organisation in the field of rural development.

Two months after I had moved on, the leader of the organisation was involved in a false case as arrested by the police. It was a huge shock to everybody. After a period of mobilisation of opinion to prove that the case was false a public pressure drive was launched on the government. I fortunately knew Mahasweta Devi's grandson, hence I requested her to write in favour of the organisation, which she did. After about a month the leader of the organisation was released from prison or 'correctional home' as they are called now.

Experiments with Rural Development

The story of Sujit Sinha, unlike mine, to some extent resembles the story of Mohan Bhargava. He was a product of Presidency College

in the years after the Naxalite Movement. He went to Princeton University, completed his PhD and started to work at Bell Laboratories (popularly known as Bell Labs). From there he returned to India and after a period of initial exploration started his own organisation in the district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. The organisation was named Swanirvar (meaning self-reliance). The head office of the organisation was set up in village Andharmanik in the Baduria block of the district. Sujit, or Sujit-*da* as he is known to his fans, was helped by a group of youths from nearby villages. A former journalist named Tirthankar Mukherjee, popularly known as Bhulu-*da* also joined. Sometime later, a Bengali gentleman based in UK also joined the organisation and formed an organisation in UK named Friends of Swanirvar, which played a significant role in raising funds. Friends in the US also created small fund raising organisations, thanks to which Swanirvar never reached the point where donor agencies could dictate terms.

Swanirvar was formed in 1989 and started functioning in 1990. In a way this was the other side of globalisation. This was roughly the time when Soviet Union had collapsed and American capitalism seemed to be the only answer to the world. Indian economy was also opening up and beginning to take steps away from Nehruvian socialism as I have mentioned in Chapter 1. On the other hand, the Left Front regime in West Bengal had established itself as a regime more than a Leftist government. The Maoists were still present but did not offer anything substantially new.

The emergence of the NGOs in West Bengal can be to some extent located within this context, but not entirely. There was one trend which went back to the strong tradition of voluntary movement for social and political change of the pre-independence days. I was, for example, pleasantly surprised to find NGOs with names such as Kajla Jana Kalyan Samity, (literally meaning organization for public welfare from Kajla) which was an NGO based in Medinipur where the voluntary movement had been strong during pre-independence days. Similarly, there was the West Bengal Voluntary Health Organisation which continued the spirit of voluntary movement in terms of blood donation. The debates on Marxism and capitalism, postmodernism and environmentalism did not touch such organisations. They continued as robust nationalist organisations carrying forward the tradition of the pre-independence

days. Organisations like the Tagore Society or Elmhirst Institute of Community Studies (EICS) in Santiniketan continued to work in the tradition of Tagore's rural reconstruction. On the other hand there were organisations such as Swayam, Sanhita and Sanlaap which were explicitly feminist organisations; DRCSC better known as Service Centre was into sustainable agriculture; Nagarik Mancha was into rights based activism on issues concerning labour and APDR emerged as an organisation for protection of human rights. The last two organisations may be seen as post-Naxalite organisations in the sense that they have their roots in the Naxalite movement but have evolved a different strategy for social change based on peaceful activism. One can perhaps add JSK as another such organisation which shares a root in the Naxalite movement but has evolved into rights based activism on issues related to agricultural labour and rights of women.

Swanirvar, ideologically speaking, can be located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of ideological positions taken up by the NGOs of West Bengal. At one extreme we can locate NGOs which work as the extended arm of the government, taking funds from the Social Welfare Department. Close to this come the NGOs that work independently but always maintain a close relationship with the government. At the other end of the spectrum lies the NGOs that are clearly anti-Left front and anti-government and most of their activities are about asserting the rights of the citizens against the state. It is also worth noting that there was hardly any unity between the NGOs taking up various ideological positions and it will be a mistake to think of the NGO sector as a unified entity. In our college days there was a running joke that for every five Naxalites there were six organisations who had sharp ideological differences amongst themselves—the same holds true of the NGO world of West Bengal as well.

Since Sujit Sinha was a scientist, his approach to Swanirvar was also to some extent that of a scientist. Swanirvar was conceptualised by Sinha as a laboratory for experiments on various aspects of social change. Once something worked at a small-scale, Swanirvar's aim was to influence the government, either locally or at the state level. Sinha himself often used to use the phrase of Shankar Guha Niyogi to describe the ideological position of Swanirvar-*sangharsh aur nirman*, (which may be roughly translated as conflict and

construction). Swanirvar was by nature not a 'sangharsh' type of NGO. It believed more in 'nirman'. At the same time Swanirvar became part of a network of NGOs across West Bengal and also indeed all over India. When I was at Swanirvar, the organisation was part of three such networks. The first was a network on sustainable agriculture which was headed by an NGO named Development Research Communication and Services Centre (DRCSC), or Service Centre in short. The second was a network of NGOs connected to a donor agency called Child Rights and You (CRY), which was known as National Alliance for Right to Education (NAFRE) and the third was a network of NGOs practicing Microfinance as part of a project named CASHE[2] which was being implemented by an international NGO named CARE in the states of West Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

My first day at Swanirvar started with a meeting at CARE's office in Kolkata. I had some exposure to the concept of funding agency previously but CARE's office was much bigger than anything I had seen so far. I was accompanying Dr Sinha while two other gentlemen had come over from the field office of Swanirvar. CARE was represented by the Project Manager and the person who was directly responsible for looking after our project. There was another person to my left, a person in his mid-50s or early 60s with grey hair, but firmly built. The meeting was held in a small room. It was a shock for me because I didn't understand almost any of the discussion, which involved acronyms and jargon like 'portfolio at risk', 'SHG', 'bad debt', so on and so forth. What was quite clear was that Swanirvar was being thrashed and there was even some threat of cancellation of the contract. In a way this was my entry into the 'development sector' with contracts, budgets, log frames, projects, annual reviews and quarterly reports. The elderly man sitting next to me turned out to a banking professional who has taken early retirement and has responded to an advertisement by CARE to recruit a financial advisor for Swanirvar's microfinance programme. We had a quick lunch at CARE's office and then moved towards the Sealdah station from where we were to catch the Bongaon Local. The Bongaon Local is usually one of the most notoriously crowded local trains in West Bengal. Fortunately this was around three in the afternoon and crowd returning home after office was yet to arrive. Hence we managed to get seats to sit on. We disembarked at a station called

Machlandapur. From there the two gentlemen from the villages—Niranjan-*da* and Bishnu—left on their motor cycle. Dr Sinha and I got into a bus that after nearly 45 minutes dropped us at a bus stop called Andharmanik. We got down and after a short walk through a winding road we reached the Head office of Swanirvar, next to a large pond. The office cum training centre was built by an architect friend of Sujit-*da* and is one of the most interesting NGO offices I have seen in my life.

There were certain philosophical aspects to the building. The first, for example, was the fact that there was no clear entry and exit in the building which symbolically meant that there was no closed door as such. Second, the office did not have physical demarcations of hierarchy, in other words, there were no separate chambers for people of various ranks. Third, there was hardly any room which was box-like rectangles; all of them had a magical shape of their own, each room having at least five corners. There was a round courtyard in the middle which was the place where everyone congregated to have lunch or dinner. When training programmes were on there were days when nearly a hundred persons had lunch and all of it were cooked by two fragile built women who were in charge of the kitchen. The kitchen and the style of eating was something quite similar to the way it happens in a joint family and one could see in it an attempt to build an organisation that was like a larger family. Bhulu-*da*, the eldest person in the whole group wanted the kitchen to be entirely vegetarian and lifestyle to be frugal but gradually a certain amount of lavishness in the form of non-vegetarian food had crept in. The lunch was usually a joyous affair, chatting, joking and leg-pulling being an intrinsic part of it. I was however yet to be part of such a lunch. That evening the office was almost empty, except a few who had stayed for the purpose of a formulating a budget. I decided to stay on even though there was hardly any money as I thought that this would be a tremendous opportunity to learn various aspects of rural development.

There could be unexpected lessons of course. I was the urban 'intellectual' who had the habit of going to sleep late and waking up late. One day I heard a loud thump on the door of the room where I was staying on the first floor of the Swanirvar building. It was around five-thirty in the morning, which was for all practical purposes my

midnight. I woke up and opened the door. There was someone waiting to outside. With a smiling face he called me, 'Come quickly'. I could not understand what was going on so I rushed out to the verandah and looked down from it. There was lot of noise near the pond next to the building. 'Come over', someone gestured change accepted to me with a smile. I saw with half closed eyes a group of men in the pond with fishing nets catching fish. It was quite an amazing experience to see the dexterity with which the men swam around and pulled the fish nets and caught the fishes. I also realised that although hierarchically I was superior to them there were many things which they were good at doing which I was not.

A roughly similar experience happened to a group of about 15 undergraduate students from Princeton University who came as volunteers during their summer break. This was the height of monsoon in West Bengal and we were not sure how advisable it would be for them to come over during this time of the year. As bright students, some of them of Indian–American origin, their idea was to teach something to the children. It soon became clear to them they had a lot to learn about how development work is done. They were given an exposure to various forms of development activity. Some of them were simply fascinated by the fact that they could see snakes moving around the ponds. These were not venomous snakes and therefore they had great fun in chasing them. The students from Princeton University had come to give something to the poor Indians. They left, after a stint of development tourism, with some knowledge for themselves. The incident was a funny one for me in the sense that it was good to see overconfident American youth humbled by the semi-educated rural people around me, and this included a game of cricket which they tried to play. At the same time I had to give to the students some credit for at least showing interest in visiting a place in rural India. We never got any student from any of the academic institutions in Kolkata to visit us although village Andharmanik was only about 50 kilometres from Kolkata and the accommodation available were good enough for urban people.

I had heard from various sources around me while growing up (I can't pin point the exact source though) about urban male Marxists trying to de-class themselves and many apparently managed to do so. I have also heard stories of men who have left

the city entirely and started to live in a village and have got married to tribal women, so on and so forth. The time when I decided to check out life in the village was perhaps a deeply cynical time and I was never really fully convinced that it is possible to transform my own identity. Yet there was a complex encounter between us. One thing I made sure was that I did not treat anybody in a derogatory manner; I was perhaps sensitive enough not to do that. There were some local employees who did not like my entry into the organisation and I could understand that they felt jealous of my relatively privileged background and felt that they would have done better if they had got as much opportunity as me. Otherwise there wasn't any problem in terms of getting along as far as working is concerned. I also decided not to change into any kind of artificial wear, that is, I stuck to the same kind of clothes that I wear normally in the city. This was a statement—I was accepting that I was urban while at the same time trying to open up a channel of communication with people who were in many ways coming from a different background. Thus, it was common for the village folk to wear *lungi* and fold it up like a skirt (similar to what men do in South India) during the summer months, but I could not get into a *lungi.* This was more than just a matter of convenience. I wanted to remain who I was.

The negotiation regarding the body perhaps was easier for me because I was a man. It would have been that much more difficult to achieve if there would have been a woman in my place. In that case a certain amount of compromise regarding what to wear and what not to wear would have been inevitable. Indeed perhaps the biggest difference that was difficult to bridge was views on gender. The society that I was visiting was not far away from Kolkata, in fact only about 50 kilometres away, yet the two worlds were very different. The patriarchal nature of the society was so stark that it was impossible for me at times to talk with my colleagues outside the strictly development related activities. In the society I belonged to in the city there was patriarchy but certain amount of equality of sexes had become common place. Experiments with sexuality, divorce and even homosexuality were becoming common. On the other hand in the rural society that I encountered it was still a big issue as to whether the woman of the household can go out on her own. Hence, I often had weird disjointed experiences—in the morning at village Andharmanik I would hear about stories of husbands beating up

their wives or abandoning them, or how somebody is facing problems at home because she is going out as part of NGO work and if on the same day I returned to Kolkata and sat down with my friends in the evening *adda* I would hear about some lady who has dumped her latest boy friend/husband/partner.

Unless we register this difference we cannot quite understand the significance of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs). If one is brought up in a narrative of great revolutions, of sudden dramatic transformations, of Bolshevik style seizure of power or extraordinarily rare feats of human endurance such as the Long March or indeed the heady exciting days of the Naxalite movement it may be difficult to visualise a small group of women regularly sitting down together, saving some money and taking loans to improve their conditions as something exciting. The revolutionary narratives associated with Marxism consist of immense sacrifice, extraordinary intellectual brilliance, selfless courage and dramatic transformation. Who can forget the famous scenes from Battleship Potemkin or the Black and White drawings of Lenin giving a speech at St. Petersburg? Who can forget the first few lines of the Communist Manifesto which announced that a spectre is haunting Europe? On the other hand try to visualise about ten to twenty women, one from each family of a rural neighbourhood coming together on a late afternoon once in fifteen days. They sit down, usually on a mat and discuss their activities related to their own benefit. What can be more mundane than some women of the neighbourhood sitting down to do nothing more than save a little bit of money and take some loan? Can there be anything more 'reactionary' than this?

Philosophically also, the SHG is a concept that goes against what is conventionally understood as Marxism and its most famous exponent, Mohammad Yunus of Bangladesh, is a declared capitalist. At its core the concept has a certain premise—people come together if there is some direct and tangible benefit for them. The success of the SHG concept lies in convincing deeply patriarchal families that if women form SHGs then the family would benefit because they will get cheap loans, which will solve the endemic problem of credit shortage. The women get a chance to get out of the boredom of the daily chore and come out of the in-laws residence. The work that they need to do is also fairly simple—they have to ensure that they have a meeting at regular intervals (once a week), where they would

maintain a certain number of documents related to their meeting and the resolutions they would take and also of the savings they would make and the loans that they would take. If there are one or two reasonably educated people in the group, it is enough to keep the records on behalf of the entire group. In other words, even if there are a large number of illiterate women involved it is possible for them to form a group. There is usually a president, a secretary and a treasurer.

The transformation in the women brought about by the involvement in the SHG movement and getting involved in the work of NGOs showed itself in the subtle changes in the way the women wore their sari, tied their hair and conducted themselves in general. They would also look straight into my eyes while talking, which was rare in case of village women. We were mostly busy in trying to repair the financial management structure of the SHG programme, and the subtle changes in the personality of the women came out not in any particular impact assessment document, but in informal circumstances, the way the leaders of the SHGs would come to the Swanirvar Training Centre and spend the night there away from their family in order to receive training from other men. Sometimes they were accompanied by their husbands, but that was rare. They would come in as a group and leave as a group. The names of the groups often were in the names of nationalist icons like Matangini Hajra.

The group formed the core of the almost all development strategies that were becoming popular during this time. This was a decisive shift—from individuals to groups. Swanirvar for example created a number of groups of farmers, who were willing to experiment with seeds that were not genetically modified or of the high yielding variety. They were willing to experiment with organically grown manure such as the one produced through the system of *vermicompost* and avoid using harmful and expensive pesticides. Swanirvar's field area, the district of North 24 Parganas, is one of the most densely populated areas of India and hence of the world. Size of arable land usually available to a household is quite small, hardly ever more than 2–3 acres. The land is fortunately fertile and therefore it is possible to raise three crops a year. This is also one of the areas of West Bengal which had benefited from the technological innovations commonly known as the Green

Revolution. However, by the turn of the century, the ill effects of Green Revolution were beginning to show. Soil was gradually losing its nutrients; there was an increasing arsenic contamination of groundwater leading to serious health hazards, cost of agricultural inputs was going up making agriculture more and more unprofitable. The strategy that was developed by Swanirvar along with other partners of the Sustainable Agriculture Network under the leadership of an NGO named Service Centre was to on the one hand develop farmers group that would carry out the experiments with organic agriculture which was cost effective and at the same time create nutrition garden in and around their homestead plots so that they can get sufficient food security all through the year. The nutrition garden was again something in which the women of the Self Help Groups could get involved in. This is a practice with which women were more comfortable with than men and something that they could develop almost without any financial expense. The roof of the mud house could be converted into a garden of leguminous plants like gourd or pumpkin. A family could also build a small nursery and plant trees that in future could be sold for a high price apart from helping the cause of the environment.

The agriculture wing of Swanirvar also carried out extensive training (capacity-building is the jargon used in the development sector) of the farmers in various aspects of farming, for example, how to rejuvenate the soil, how to identify and preserve quality seeds, how to identify friendly pests and the enemy pest, how to produce organic manure so on and so forth. One of the things that I was fortunate to learn was that agriculture was a highly technical exercise and farmers very often did not have adequate knowledge of what to do when, although they did have some traditional knowledge.

The concept of a group was also applied extensively in case of education. The pre-primary and the primary teachers formed a group among themselves and would congregate once a month to discuss various matters related to the class room transaction, such as teaching techniques, methods of evaluation, and devised teaching learning materials (popularly known as TLM). The teachers in turn would divide the students into groups inside the class room and give their lessons. The division of the students into groups helped to cope with students of various levels and also made the tasks of the

students a lot easier as they did not feel terrorised which is often the case when the student has to work alone. The result was the tremendous ownership of the schools that was developed by the children. I have one enduring memory— every morning one of the students would come and open the keys of the school. This was not left to any security person. The protection of the schools was left to the people of the villages. It was after all their school. Then another group of students would come and clean up the school and then slowly the school would start.

What about the life of children outside the class room? The children belonging to the high schools of the local area were organised into the Teen Brigade or the Kishore Kishori Bahini (literarally, Young Adult Force). In countries such as India, an educated student is an intellectual asset for a village as very few manage to go beyond Class VIII. Hence, with a little bit of training the students from the High School can become change agents within their own village. So it is possible for them to teach other children, maintain temperature charts, plant trees, vaccinate domesticated animals and improve the cleanliness of the village. Once they get used to such voluntary work as individuals and as a group they can take up any other activity as and when they are required. Instead of hating the world they live in they learn to become empowered agents of change.

This is of course not to suggest that Swanirvar has managed to do all that it wanted to achieve. Indeed there have been many a failures. Indeed none of these achievements are exceptional and therefore can be easily replicated. However, the purpose of this chapter is not so much to judge any particular NGO or to test empirically how far these programmes have been implemented on the ground. The purpose here is to explore certain concepts that perhaps can be part of a Marxist imaginary. We are halfway through the journey that I am describing in this chapter and it may be a convenient point to reiterate this basic objective of the chapter. I am not interested in an empirical analysis of the NGO sector although that can be an interesting study in itself. What I wish to explore are certain ideas that have been at least to some extent achieved in practice and which I have had a chance to see being implemented.

The Horror of Human Trafficking

Shahida Bibi (name changed) was telling us her story. She was a frail young woman with bright eyes. We were sitting in the field office of Association for Community Development (ACD) in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. I had gone there as part of a monitoring tour on behalf of a French NGO named Groupe Développement which had opened an office in Kolkata in 2003–04. ACD was one of our partners in Bangladesh. Shahida Bibi was telling us the story of how she was trafficked. She was like any other girl growing up in conservative and patriarchal rural Bangladesh where she received very little education and was at one point of married off by her family. Her parents obviously did not bother to look closely at the family, before marrying their daughter off to them. After a few days of marriage she was taken to a border region where she was told that she and her husband would be able to cross the border and migrate to India where better opportunities were in store for them. One day while sleeping at night, she felt some kind of a light on her eyes. She opened her eyes and found that she was tied to a rope and some people were looking at her with a torch light. She also realised that there were quite a few men in the room and all of them were looking at her. She initially thought that she was about to get raped by them, but after a few seconds she realised that they were not exactly trying to rape her. In anxiety and fear she asked them what they were trying to do. One of the men replied in a matter of fact voice that they were inspecting her just as they would inspect a cow before buying her. Through an extraordinary stroke of good fortune she managed to escape while she was being trafficked across the border, exactly how I cannot remember. She managed to return to her village and got protection from ACD.

The brutality of human trafficking is something that cannot quite be understood in theoretical terms or by reading documents. In a postmodern and post-industrial world it is difficult to imagine buying and selling of human beings could actually be one of the biggest illegal businesses after arms smuggling and drug trafficking. It is not possible to say exactly how big is the volume of this business but there cannot be any doubt there are international networks of traffickers who manage to escape all forms of police surveillance

and buy and sell adult and children. It was quite astonishing to meet a child in a Rajshahi village who ended up as a camel jockey in Saudi Arabia. Apparently, small children are very much in demand as camel jockeys. The secret of the success of the trafficking network lies in the fact that no one except the mastermind knows the entire chain through which trafficking takes place. For example, let us consider what could have happened to Shaida Bibi had she got trafficked. The first element in the chain consists of a person in the locality who acts as an agent for someone else. His job is to convince a poor family to get their daughter married to someone in some other village. For doing this he receives a fee from the next person in the chain but he does not know who is it there after the next person in the chain. So, once the daughter is married off, the husband/husband's family would sell the girl to someone who will be responsible for ensuring that she crosses the border and is handed over to someone else. That person would hand over the girl to someone who would board a train to cities like Mumbai for example. On landing at the station he will take the girl to the red light area from where someone else would take over to ensure that she is sold as a prostitute. There can be variations of this story as well. Women and children who are trafficked are not always tricked from the very beginning, some like to deliberately move to brothels and dance bars in Mumbai in order to earn money and avoid the misery of poverty and restriction of village life. In southern Bangladesh, in the district of Jessore, they are called 'Bombay girls'. Trafficking could also be local in the sense that girls may get trafficked from a district like South 24 Parganas in West Bengal to the brothels of Sonagachi in Kolkata. Here sometimes the trafficker could be someone who was once trafficked into prostitution, has grown old and, therefore, has naturally progressed into the business of procuring prostitutes. The most harrowing variety however is the case of parents selling off their children themselves as has been found in several cases in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. It can also be said that there is a very fine distinction between selling off the child directly and marrying off one's daughter to unknown people in exchange of money. The latter is of course more prevalent than the former.

In South Asia, there are several routes of trafficking:

- from Bangladesh to brothels in Kolkata and Mumbai,
- from Nepal to brothels in Kolkata and Mumbai,
- from Bangladesh and India to the Arab world,
- more local level trafficking from districts in West Bengal and Bihar to brothels in Kolkata, and
- from different parts of West Bengal ostensibly to work as domestic help in different parts of India, especially Delhi and Mumbai.

The irony of a woman getting trafficked does not end if and when she gets rescued. The first problem of course is that the girl acquires the reputation of a 'bad girl' and therefore it becomes difficult to make our patriarchal society accept the woman. What is even more tragic is the fact that life in a brothel sometimes permanently changes the mentality of the woman—she gets used to sex and drugs and a certain kind of urban consumerist lifestyle. Therefore she finds it very difficult to adjust to the life back in the rural setting. Many of them also develop psychological disorders which require therapeutic help which again is impossible to find in the rural setting. Hence re-trafficking is quite common, that is, a woman returning to the village home again end up willingly or unwillingly back in the brothel. Some women make a compromise deal; they try to ensure that their children end up in a good place and visit them sometimes as and when they can.

Such an inhuman form of exploitation has so far attracted very little attention from traditional Marxists in West Bengal or India even though the condition of the trafficked women and children are much worse than workers in factories. Not that NGOs have achieved enormous success but they have at least taken up the issue and have to a large extent developed a definite strategy of combating the problem. The strategy consists of addressing the problem from two sides—source and destination. At the source, that is, at the village level there can be awareness campaigns. Such awareness campaign again can be of several types—there can be posters, puppet shows, folk dramas as well as more intensive campaign at the neighbourhood level. Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), an NGO in Dhaka and one of our partners while I was working in Groupe Développement had developed a system of information dissemination at the neighbourhood level in the village which is known as *Gana Kendra*. This consists of a very basic infrastructure,

sometimes not even made of concrete that is built through NGO funding and community contribution which acts as an information hub for the village. A worker of the NGO regularly conducts sessions with the villagers, especially poor women, where she explains various social issues through the use of illustrated flip charts. Such issues also include trafficking.

The second form of awareness campaign is done at the level of the various forms of local government and administration including the police in order to ensure that they are adequately sensitised about the problem of trafficking and so that they can also in turn put pressure on the influential people of the neighbourhood. Another important form of intervention is to make migration as well-informed as possible and to ensure that no one migrates with people whom they do not know or do not land up in any destination point about which they do not have any clear idea.

At the destination point the activities become much more complicated. One form of activity is to help the police in rescuing women from brothels and here an NGO named Sanlaap in West Bengal has done very good work. After rescuing a woman or a girl from a brothel she is placed in a shelter home so that she gets time to recover emotionally. Here she receives support from mental health experts and trained counselors. Sanlaap has developed an excellent model of a shelter home near Kolkata. However, the stay at the shelter home can get extremely painful for a woman if there is a case against a trafficker where she is a witness. According to law, she cannot leave the shelter home as long as the case is on as she is a key witness. Things become even more complicated if it is found that the woman is from Bangladesh. If so then a process called repatriation has to be initiated. Repatriation involves the governments of India and Bangladesh and hence can take up lot of time. There is a long bureaucratic procedure before the woman is handed over to Bangladesh government by government of India. I once went to the shelter home of Sanlaap to do some case studies for a documentation of the problems associated with repatriation. One story was particularly heart breaking. There was one woman whose little child was at home in Bangladesh and she was desperately waiting to go back to her child. However the process of repatriation was taking a long time. She simply could not understand why she was not able to go back home. She kept pleading to the staff of the

shelter home that she should be given an opportunity to go to the border area and then she would do what she used to do once every year, that is, bribe the border security personnel by sleeping with them and go back to her child. This for her was a simple procedure of going from India to Bangladesh and she could not understand why there was such a fuss over the process. Ultimately she lapsed into severe depression. Sometime matters become tragically complex because of the fact that some women find it difficult to remember the name of the village from which she came.

If the woman is from Bangladesh then she is first sent to a shelter home in Bangladesh. DAM carried such a shelter home a little outside of Jessore in Southern Bangladesh where the women and girls can recover. They are also taught some skills here so that they can earn a decent living once they go back home. DAM also carries out periodic visits to the homes of the women/girls once they are back in order to ensure that there is no discrimination against the girls once they go back home and they are able to gradually settle into their rural set up.

The third level of activity involves building networks with other NGOs and governmental agencies so that it is possible to work together to develop resistance to trafficking. This involved building networks inside India as well as building networks across South Asia. Building such a network was the focus of the work our organisation was involved in. This is an extremely complex task as building a network involves tiding of ego rivalries, rivalry for funding, rivalries between small NGOs and big NGOs. However the strategy was correct and it is only through this that an effective anti-trafficking initiative could be built.

Child Labour, Children in the Streets and Railway Platforms

In various discussions on the proletariat, the image of the proletariat that I see before my eyes is that of an adult. In the traditional Marxist discourse on labour in South Asia, and in this I include labour history as well as labour movements the concern has been for the adult labourer. Feminist scholars such as Samita Sen have argued that the concern was usually for the adult male workers. This is also to

some extent true although it will be an error to say the adult female change accepted has never been part of the Marxist discourse. The category that was absent is the child proletariat. In the long and rich historiography of labour in colonial and post-colonial India, which has been to a large extent informed by Marxist concerns, there is no mention of the child as the labourer. It seems that the child proletariat is so vulnerable that s/he has even escaped the attention of the labour historians.

There is however, a liberal rights-based discourse on the rights of the child clearly articulated in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) to which all countries of the world are supposed to be signatories. India is one of them and under pressure from the international community, child labour, child marriage and child prostitution have been banned and CRC has been officially accepted. In reality, of course, violence against children at home, at the workplace and at school has continued unabated and they remain the most vulnerable section of the urban proletariat.

While working for Groupe Développement I had the opportunity to see the condition of some urban child proletariats in various parts of urban West Bengal and Bangladesh. I also saw some of the strategies developed by NGOs to make life a little easier for these children. I saw children living and working on railway platforms, those living on the streets and children who were living in slums but were also highly vulnerable to crimes as these slums were breeding ground for criminal activity. Like the report on trafficking, I was responsible for coordinating a report on the conditions of such children in Howrah and Sealdah Stations of Kolkata, in Asansol Station in the Bardhaman district of West Bengal and in Barisal and Khulna towns of Bangladesh. The research was carried out by the Kolkata-based NGO Praajak, Don Bosco Ashalayam (DBA) and Aparajeyo Bangladesh with support from us at Groupe Développement. We also commissioned two psychotherapists to carry out a study of sexual abuse of children at Howrah and Sealdah stations. The report was finally edited and published by Groupe Développement.

To put it briefly, it is seen both in West Bengal and Bangladesh that for various reasons children from rural areas leave home and end up living on railway platforms. The reason for this could be domestic violence but it is not always so. Sometimes children are

lured by the prospect of a 'free life' in the stations and various wild stories of a heroic life of some child who lived in the station could also be a reason. Some children flee from home and live in railway stations for a while and then go back, come back again and then finally decide to start living in stations.

At the station, they usually find a group of their own with whom they develop a strong bond. The train acts as a strong lure for these children and their lives revolve around the train. They scout the trains for food and goods they can sell off and also travel around extensively on those trains. The amount they travel around is in fact quite astonishing—it is not unusual to find a boy or a girl in Dhaka who has visited various parts of India simply by traveling on the train and somehow managing to do so without a ticket.

At these railway stations, children are usually exploited by the station staff and the porters in the areas around the station. The children work in various places in and around stations such as Howrah and Sealdah and earn a lot less than they are supposed to. However, unlike most other children they get money at a very early age without knowing for certain what they are supposed to do with it. In the absence of proper parental care these children end up wasting their money on various attractions and also almost always end up in spending a fare amount of their income in various forms of addiction, technically known as substance abuse. Apart from economic exploitation the children also end up getting sexually abused and in turn develop complex sexual habits which make them highly prone to sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. The children develop a fierce sense of independence but are not able to understand where exactly they get exploited. They do not understand that in the absence of proper education and skill development they do not have any future. As the children grow up they either fall prey to drug addiction or join the criminal fringe.

The various communist parties of West Bengal—Marxist, Marxist–Leninist, Maoist, etc., have not taken any notice of them. Solutions have come from Christian missionary organisations such as DBA, and moderate NGOs such as Praajak in West Bengal, and Aparajeyo Bangladesh in Bangladesh. There are other NGOs also but I am not mentioning them as I have not closely seen what they have done in this area. Once again it is not possible to say that the problem has been solved by the NGOs, but like human trafficking it

is possible to say that definite strategies are now in place. Let me discuss the case of DBA as an example. The first step consists of sending a trained social worker as an outreach worker to railway stations to develop a close relationship with the children. This is an extremely difficult task as children are fiercely independent and are not willing to take advice from anyone. In some cases the outreach worker fails to make a connect with these children. But, after an initial period of mistrust, the children become friends with the outreach worker after a while. After this it is the responsibility of the outreach worker to introduce certain hygienic habits into the children and introduce certain forms of non-formal education to them.

Once this first step is achieved the children are then encouraged to move to a night shelter at night so that the children are safe at least at night. Because many children fall prey to drug addiction or develop sexual relationships, they sometimes do not end up at the night shelter, but mostly they do as dinner and warm clothing during winter is assured in these shelters.

The next step is the big jump where children are encouraged to permanently leave their lives at the station and join the shelter home. Many children do not make this step as they get used to their life in the stations. The children who make it have to then undergo a strict disciplinary process and go to school like any other child. Apart from formal schooling, DBA also encourages the students to learn various crafts so that they are able to get jobs as skilled workers. When I was there at Groupe Développement, DBA also had a placement cell which was responsible for finding jobs for the children once they turn into adults. The organisation continues to provide them support till they get married and settle down.

The strategy followed by DBA is a comprehensive one, but it has certain shortcomings. The most important one is the fact that it is a very costly system and only the financially powerful organisations can afford to adopt this methodology. The second important drawback is that at no stage does their methodology involve the state and try to make the state responsible for these children. This is where the intervention by Praajak has done something that one would have thought is impossible to do—involve the Railway Police Force (RPF) to take care of the children on the platforms and provide technical inputs to them to do their work. If RPF takes it up as their official agenda to protect these children,

then the process gets institutionalised as the NGOs can come and go whereas the RPF would always be there.

Marxist Discourse and NGOs

In 1984, an article by Prakash Karat appeared in the journal published by CPI(M), *The Marxist.* The name of the article was 'Action Groups/Voluntary Organisations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy'.[3] The article was later converted into a book named *Foreign Funding and the Philosophy of Voluntary Organisations: A factor in Imperialist Strategy.*[4] Karat described the NGOs as the Trojan horse with which the imperialist agencies were trying through foreign funding to create a 'vehicle to counter and disrupt the potential of the Left movement', which the imperialists recognised as the strongest protector of Indian sovereignty. People were turning away from the Left movement towards NGOs not because the Left has failed to organise them creatively, but because the NGOs were getting finance from foreign donor agencies, something that Left parties were unable to do. Thus although the NGOs appear to be doing good work for the society, they actually blunt the radical potential of people's grievances and help to co-opt such movements within the system of capitalist hegemony. Dependence on foreign funds force NGOs not to take up radical postures and only help in making existing exploitative relations more bearable. Such an argument was pushed forward by scholars such as Neera Chandoke as well.

There is a grain of truth in all these arguments. However, the flaws in the arguments are even greater. First, foreign funding is not the only source of finance for the NGO sector. There are plenty organisations which do not depend on foreign funding and, in fact, are ideologically opposed to foreign funding. Second, it is not clear whether the critics of NGOs would mind receiving funding from foreign sources to improve the prospects of their own movements. The communist movement in the days of Bolshevik glory received foreign funding from Communists outside India and therefore it is difficult to understand why Karat was so opposed to foreign funding as such. Third, the charge of NGOs blunting the edge of radical movements seem strange when one sees NGOs taking up the Right to Food or Right to Information campaign, championing the cause

of sustainable agriculture, the cause of quality education for the poor children, fighting for the implementation of CRC, fighting against violence to women. The NGOs have not prevented the communist movement from taking up the cause of right to food or the cause of better education and healthcare for the poor. Nor have they blunted the edge of Communist Movement by forcing them not to champion the cause of protection of poor farmers by offering alternative strategies of agricultural production. NGOs have not prevented the Communist parties from developing teaching methods through which a teacher can teach a large number of poor children in the class room some of whom may be first generation learners. A Christian missionary organisation like DBA is certainly not interested in fighting global imperialism. However they have not prevented communist parties from taking up the cause of vulnerable children living in the railway platforms. Similarly, it is possible that European Commission and US AID's interest in preventing trafficking of human beings is actually a covert design to spread the wings of capitalist imperialism, although it is not clear exactly how. However, what is not at all clear is why the communist parties have not taken up the cause of such a barbaric form of exploitation of human beings and preferred to concentrate on bank and government employees, school teachers and workers in the formal sector who are much better off than the poor girl who gets sold off to brothels or the little child who gets sold off to work as a camel jockey. It is difficult to understand why orthodox Marxists like Karat, with a huge political force at his disposal, have not pressurised the Government of India to seriously implement the Convention of the Rights of the Child in India or to implement the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The problem clearly lies elsewhere. What Karat's thesis actually reflects is a certain form of rigid mindset that refuses to learn from others and enrich the political process of Marxism. There is no doubt that NGOs constitute a moderate force within the society, and have their share of shortcomings, and they definitely cannot transform the existing class relations. However, what the moderate NGOs certainly have done is to develop the technology of solving specific problems and the communist movement in India and elsewhere can benefit immensely from them by learning such technologies. To give just a few examples from my own experiences:

- how to create a quality school for the poor,
- how to make the poor creditworthy through SHGs,
- how to develop nutrition gardens for a poor household,
- how to develop low cost methods of sustainable agriculture,
- how to teach vulnerable children in streets, slums and railway platforms,
- how to rescue and rehabilitate victims of trafficking,
- how to build the capacity of human resource coming from poor households, and
- how to develop the capacity of poor and mostly illiterate rural women through formation of SHGs.

I cannot see how the radical edge of the communist movement can be blunted by a willingness to learn a few things from moderate NGOs, especially in a situation where Bolshevik style revolutions looks like a distant dream in India.

Notes and References

[1] Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Longman, New York, 1983.

[2] Credit and Savings for Household Enterprises

[3] http://www.cpim.org/marxist/198402_marxist_vol_org_prakash.htm Checked on 19 October 2014

[4] Prakash Karat, *Foreign Funding and the Philosophy of Voluntary Organisations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy*, National Book Centre, New Delhi, India. 1988.

4

Centralised Decentralisation
An Assessment of Panchayati Raj under Left Front

Inside the Panchayat Department

On 1 January 2006, I joined the Panchayats and Rural Development as Research Coordinator in a project named Strengthening Rural Decentralisation, better known as SRD. The project was funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), Government of UK. The aim of the project was to reduce poverty by strengthening the panchayat system of the state specifically in some less developed districts.[1] For the implementation of the project the Panchayat Department recruited professionals from the market although the three top posts—Project Director, Project Coordinator and Project Administrator were from the Indian and West Bengal Civil Services. Also, technically speaking, our appointment was given by the West Bengal State Rural Development Agency, an agency of the Panchayat Department rather than the department itself. In terms of employment policy also there was a distinction between those recruited for the project and those who were proper departmental staff—the newly recruited personnel were contractual workers rather than permanent employees. The Finance Department of the government was averse to adding more permanent employees on the pay roll since that state's finances were not in good shape and hence the system of contractual employment was introduced.

I worked in my capacity as the Research and Studies Coordinator

for three and half years till middle of June 2009 after which I left for Delhi to join the Institute of Social Sciences. I was responsible for managing the research programme which led to nine studies on panchayat-related issues in West Bengal, out of which I was directly involved in one study, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The time spent in the department also gave me an opportunity to see a government department in action. This was indeed a rare and valuable opportunity although this is not what I was looking for when I applied for the job. I also got an opportunity to collect and study various published and unpublished documents related to the panchayats in West Bengal, something that I continued during my tenure at the Institute of Social Sciences, which has a good library on panchayat system of India.

The Panchayat Department (formally Panchayats and Rural Development Department) was located near Strand Road in central Kolkata not far from the Dalhousie Square in a building known as the Jessop Building. The building was originally a ware house during the British period and was converted into a Government Office later on. The ground floor consisted of a huge garage for the cars and later in course of the project a studio was also built for satellite based conferences and general meeting of the Department. There was a mezzanine floor which was converted into the project office of SRD, known as the SRD Cell. On the first floor was the proper department. This was divided into two sections. The first section consisted of the room for the Principal Secretary (the head of the department), a big conference hall where departmental meetings were held and also a chamber for the Minister of State for Panchayats and his secretary. This was the relatively cleaner section of the Panchayat department. The other side of the first floor consisted of series of small make-shift chambers for various Departmental officers from the Indian and West Bengal Civil Service and a long open section for the clerical staff. Various civil servants sitting in the chambers usually handled different centrally and state sponsored schemes. Some senior officers supervised the work of several such officers.

As an outsider the first thing that I had to get used to was unclean toilets which were reminiscent of my experience of Writers Buildings. The Jessop Building itself was not a particularly clean place except for the area in the first floor where the Principal Secretary used to sit. I once tried to find out why is it so difficult to clean the building. It

came out that the responsibility for maintaining the building was not in the hand of the Panchayat department but in the hand of Public Works Department (PWD) and hence even small repairs had to be done by them. Thus the persons who were responsible for cleaning the building were not responsible to the Panchayat department and hence it was difficult to hold them accountable.

The second thing I had to get used to was the file. Every activity in the department started with a file. The files of the department proper were bluish in colour whereas the files of the SRD Cell were yellowish to make a distinction between regular departmental activity and specific project activity. The file consisted of two parts. On the left side were the note sheets and on the right side were the supporting documents. So if I wrote a concept note that was placed on the right side and on the left side in the note sheet. I wrote what I wanted to for my superior and marked the note sheet to the superior and then sent the file to him for his approval. The file would come back to me either approving the concept note or with specific corrections.

In the department I saw a huge number of files piled up in different tables and even some old one rotting on the floor in different corners. How a file never got lost is bit of a mystery, but they usually didn't. Over time each file contained the history of an activity and therefore our lives depended on that file and we had to take great care to ensure that the files were not lost. I also got used to a particular bureaucratic vocabulary in which note sheets were written. It was an unwritten rule not to write anything controversial in a note sheet. The unwritten rule was that controversial discussions were usually thrashed out verbally and once the decision was taken the note sheets were written accordingly so that the files reflected a smooth correspondence rather than a debate.

My superior, Shri Dilip Ghosh, was a senior official, a Special Secretary, just under the Principal Secretary for whom SRD was one of many responsibilities. So every day in the morning on the left side of his table a small mountain of files would accumulate and it was his daily job to take care of those files by end of the day. An efficient Coordinator was the one who managed to get his/her files passed by the superior quickly and ensure that his/her files were treated as priority files. There were all sorts of tricks one had to play to ensure that the files did not get stuck at the superior's table. Hence maintaining good relations with the superior was of prime importance.

Sometimes jealousy would develop between various Coordinators regarding whose files were getting priority over whom.

Although I was lucky to get an excellent superior officer, Research and Studies was not high priority and therefore my usual routine was to come in the morning, do the necessary file related activities and send it to my superior. If the file did not come back within a couple of days I went to my superior's chamber in the late afternoon and gave him a friendly knock. Typically the senior officials who had to dispose several files in a day were over worked whereas the staff under them did not have much work. The entire system was top-heavy. While waiting for the files to return to me, I got a significant amount of time to study panchayat related published and unpublished documents. I became interested in trying to make sense of various micro-studies on the PRI system of West Bengal, one of the proud achievements of the Left Front Government, in order to build a narrative of the entire period of Left Front rule. This work, which was not one of my official activities, continued till 2010. What follows is the result of this exploration. I have divided the existing research into certain thematic areas: (i) changing patterns of the institutional structure; (ii) dynamics between the administration and the panchayats; (iii) interface between the party and the panchayats; (iv) people's participation and planning from below; (v) impact on poverty; and (vi) changing patterns of rural class structure.

Changing Patterns of the Institutional Structure

After coming to power in 1977, CPI(M) retained the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 but with some amendments, thus reflecting a new kind of political pragmatism. The most important innovation in the context of India that they introduced was that all tiers of the panchayats would have party based elections and second, there would be direct elections to all three tiers. As a result in 1978 elections were held in all three tiers of the Panchayat, a first in case of India.

The gram panchayat (GP), the tier closest to the rural people, consisted of anything between five to twenty five members elected by the adult voters. For every 500 voters there was one member.

The *Pradhan* (or the Chairperson) and the *Upa-Pradhan* (or the Vice-Chairperson) of the GP was not elected directly but by its elected members. Every development block had one Panchayat Samiti which usually had the same name as the development block. It also consisted of members who were directly elected by the electorate but in addition the *Pradhan*s of all the GPs under the Panchayat Samiti and the local MLA and MP were also made members of the Samiti as long as they were not Ministers. As in the case of the GP, the members among themselves selected a *Sabhapati* and a *Sahakari-Sabhapati* as the heads of the Samiti.

At the level of the Zila Parishad (District level PRI body) also the members were elected, each Block electing two members. *Sabhapati*s of all Panchayat Samities of the district as also the MLA and MPs of the district were ex-officio members of the Zila Parishad. Members of the Zila Parishad chose among themselves who would be *Sabhadhipati* and *Sahakari Sabhadhipati*.

Each Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad also had several standing committees called Sthayee Samities which carried out different development functions. The head of the Sthayee Samities were known as *Karmadhyakshas*.

In 1985–86, in order to facilitate decentralised planning, two new structures were added. The first was the Block Planning Committee and the second was the District Planning Committee. They were to be headed by the *Sabhapati* and the *Sabhadhipati* respectively. The Pradhans and the *Karmadhyakshas* (head of the standing committees) of Panchayat Samities and the Block level officials of different departments were made members of the Block Planning Committees. Similarly the *Sabhapatis* of the Panchayat Samities, the Karmadhyakshas of the Zila Parishads, the Chairpersons of Municipalities, and district level officials were made members of the district planning committees. Provisions for budgets of different departments for district level items were made by these planning bodies.

The District Planning Committees were also given a certain amount of untied funds under a new head of the state budget, the district plan scheme fund, to meet critical gaps between the requirements and availability of funds out of the departmental allocations.

In the 90s, three major amendments were made in 1992, 1994 and 1997. These amendments coincided with the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India, which was initiated during the Rajiv Gandhi period but finally enacted only during the regime of Narsimha Rao. The aims of the reforms introduced during this time were twofold: (a) to increase the responsibilities of the elected representatives; and (b) to make the system more accountable to the people.

One of the problems which had emerged by this time was the fact that the *Pradhan*s and the heads of the upper two tiers were becoming all powerful. Hence the amendments of 1992 strengthened the roles of the *Karmadhyaksha*s. They were made responsible for 'financial and executive administration' of the programmes or schemes under the control of the *Sthayee Samiti*s (standing committees). They were also given a certain amount of administrative power. Similarly although at this stage there was no standing committee at the level of the GP, efforts were made to strengthen the powers of the ward members. This indicated a shift towards a cabinet type of executive structure—the chairperson and his colleagues forming a team for all three tiers of the panchayat bodies. The 1992 amendment also made it mandatory for all Chairpersons and Karmadhyakshas to be full-time functionaries. By the 1997 amendment, the offices of the Pradhan and the Upa Pradhan were also made full-time.

In anticipation of the 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution, the 1992 amendment also ensured that one-third of the seats of all three tiers were reserved for women. Similarly seats were reserved for SCs and STs in all three-tiers. The number of such seats to be reserved was proportional to the percentage of SC and ST population in that area. The amendment made in 1994 also provided for reservation in the offices of both chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of all the tiers for women as well as for the SC/ST population as per the 73rd amendment.

In the 1994 amendment, in order to increase accountability of the Panchayats, a *Gram Sansad* was introduced in addition to the *Gram Sabha*, which is mandated by the Constitution. The purpose of the *Gram Sansad* was the fact that in West Bengal the GPs typically have a jurisdiction over a fairly large population, and hence the *Gram Sabha* is quite ineffective. It was felt that a ward level structure would help to make the panchayats more accountable. At

least two meetings of the *Gram Sansad* were to be organised by the Panchayat as per this amendment, one in November and another in May. One-tenth of the total adult population of the Sansad has to attend in order to fulfill the quorum. The *Gram Sabha* on the other hand was scheduled to be held once in a year during the month of December. For this the quorum was fixed at one-twentieth.

How did the *Gram Sabha* and the *Gram Sansad* interact? The *Gram Sansad* was to formulate certain resolutions which would be placed before the Gram Sabha by the GP along with its own views and action taken/proposed to be taken reports on such resolutions. Based on this the *Gram Sabha* shall take the final resolutions, except for the fact that it cannot change the list of beneficiaries selected by the *Gram Sansad*.

The 1994 amendment created a new institution known as the District Council. The Act provided that in each district of the state there shall be such a District Council. The Chairman of the Council would be, interestingly enough, the leader of the opposition. The Vice-Chairperson was to be one of the members of the Zila Parishad. Apart from these two, the Council had another nine members, five of whom would be members of the Zila Parishad, while the other four were to be officials, three of whom were to be nominated by the state government. The fourth person shall be the additional executive officer of the Zila Parishad who would be the ex-officio member secretary of the council. The main functions of the Council, as designated by the Act, are: (a) to scrutinise the accounts/budget of any panchayat body of any the three tiers within the district in order to ensure that the expenditure made by it satisfies the norms of propriety, rules and regulations; (b) to consider the audit reports of panchayats and to examine the replies to such reports furnished by the respective panchayats; and (c) to pursue the matters relating to unsettled audit objections and send its observations to the appropriate authorities for corrective action.

The State Finance Commission (SFC) was constituted as per the constitutional mandate in 1994. The Commission submitted its first report in November 1995. The state government is bound by the Constitution to set up such a Finance Commission and submit an action taken report to the Legislative Assembly regarding the recommendations of the SFC. So far four such Finance Commissions have been set up by the State Government.

Several new features were introduced to the Panchayat Act in 2003 to further reduce concentration of power. First, five *Upa-Samiti*s (standing committees) were constituted at the GP level; their functions being similar to that of the *Sthayee Samiti*s at the Block and district levels. Second, provisions were made so that opposition members are represented in each *Sthayee Samiti*. Third, Block Sansad and Zila Sansad were constituted as accountability forums for Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad. Finally, *Gram Unnayan Samiti*s were to be constituted by the *Gram Sansad*, which were to be the executive wing of the *Gram Sansad* and act as an extension arm of the GP but not a fourth tier. In the *Gram Unnayan Samiti* a provision was made to include members of local civil society organisations, self-help groups and significant educated members so that the partisan nature of decision-making may be reduced.

In addition to these amendments to the provisions of the Act, the GP Administration Rules[2] were amended in 2004. The Accounts Rules for the GP[3] in substitution of the earlier rules framed in 1990, were re-framed in 2007. The West Bengal Panchayat (Panchayat Samiti Administration) Rules, 2008 were framed as well.

Thus, on paper there have been quite a few policy changes aimed at devolution of fund, function and functionaries to the PRIs. This is certainly the result of the good intentions of some people working inside the government who would like to see changes as per the 73rd amendment. This does not mean, however, that the Government of West Bengal actually devolved power. The Finance Commission report[4] of 2008, for example, made a substantial critique of the state of affairs as far as decentralisation was concerned. Regarding functions, it observed:

> 3.11 The Cabinet decision of transferring the subjects to the three-tier Panchayats was to be given effect to by issuing appropriate notifications transferring such powers, functions and duties in the official gazette in terms of Section 207B of West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994. Notwithstanding such repeated policy declarations, such formal notifications appear to have not been issued as yet. The Cabinet sub-committee also does not appear to have taken the follow up action. While it has been repeatedly announced that the plan budget of each department has been decomposed into State level and District

level components, in reality, the same is yet to be undertaken.[5]

Similarly the conclusion is not charitable regarding devolution of funds either:

> 3.23 As for West Bengal, the fiscal system is heavily dominated by the State Government…the State Government raises 96 per cent of all revenues. Only about 6 per cent of total revenues of GPs is derived from Own Source of Revenue (OSR) and 94 per cent comes from grants and transfers, of which 70 per cent from Central Government and 24 per cent from State Government.[6]

Regarding functionaries, the Report has noted that the number of staff in all three tiers has gone up but the GPs still continues to have very little power over the staff.

> 3.69 It, therefore, appears that even in the new revitalized structure of functionaries to be available to the three-tier Panchayats, powers and authority as required for any self-governing unit have not been endowed with the Panchayati Raj institutions. Number of functionaries, particularly with the GPs, is highly inadequate and even those functionaries are not under the control and authority of the GPs so far as their appointment, transfer and disciplinary control are concerned. In respect of PSs and ZPs also, the arrangement of placing the services of the line department officials with suitable ex-officio designation (the arrangement which has, in fact, not been fully given effect to) is not expected to help much since the Panchayat bodies will have hardly any control and authority over such functionaries.[7]

This last observation clearly reveals that there was a tension between the PRIs on the one hand and the administration on the other. This tension is explored in greater detail in the next section.

Dynamics between Administration and the Panchayats

As may be understood from the above sub-section, the old colonial structure of administration was continued during the Left Front period as well. Thus West Bengal acquired a highly complicated

structure of rural governance. On the one hand there was the colonial style District Magistrate (DM) and Sub-Divisional Officers (SDO) and the line departments. The post-colonial state added the structure of the Community Development Block, popularly known as Block. The three-tier panchayats came as an addition to these structures and not as something that replaced the old structure. Thus the task of development work in a district became a highly complicated one with numerous players.

There is no study which has looked into these institutional dynamics within the system as it evolved during the 80s. However in 1992, two senior civil servants, Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay, at the request of the Government of West Bengal, went around the districts to understand how the panchayat system was working. They found many problems. Consider the following comment as an example:

> …the Panchayats have so far operated mainly in the field of development. There also, they have functioned more as implementing agencies of Union and State schemes than doing things on their own. Even as implementers of such schemes, they have had to depend on departmental staff outside their control. On the face of it they have resigned themselves to the situation, but below the surface there is great deal of dissatisfaction.[8]

In such a situation, the report continued, the Panchayats have taken up several extra-developmental activities like mediating village level disputes. However the idea of the panchayat as an institution of local self-government was not something that the panchayat leaders were familiar with.[9]

The two civil servants found plenty of examples of conflict between the departmental staff and the Panchayats. In case of Agriculture, for example, they found that the Agriculture Development Officer (ADO),

> …keeps his distance from the PS, his cooperation being available only by chance. A PS [Panchayat Samiti] Karmadhyakshya is unable to call meetings of the Krishi Sech o Samabaya Sthayee Samiti [standing committee for agriculture, irrigation and cooperatives] because the Cooperative inspector,

who is the secretary, is rarely available. Things are worse at GP level, where officials like the Agriculture Technical Assistant (KPS) and the Health Assistant largely stay away. Except for the vanishing tribe of the old faithfuls, the chowkidars, GPs have no field staff.[10]

The two civil servants noted that if Panchayats were becoming more and more important as units of self-governance then this should have led to a decrease in the size of the government machinery. The opposite seemed to be true. As per their calculations, in 1977–78 total revenue expenditure on the government machinery was Rs 701 crores. By 1991–92, it had expanded to Rs. 5,181 crores. Between 1980 and March 1991 government staff increased by 1, 57,000. They commented:

> It seems that the governmental machinery, far from diminishing, has expanded during the very period that the Panchayats have been in existence. The implication is that, whatever the rhetoric about the success of the Panchayats, the State Government has not felt under compulsion to reduce either its functions or its staff, and consequently any claim that the Panchayats have a degree of autonomy is not sustainable.[11]

A little more than a decade later, in 2005, the Panchayats Department carried out a study on the organisational issues of the Panchayats as part of the SRD programme of which I was the Research and Studies Coordinator as mentioned before.[12] The report made the following four significant comments regarding the status of PRIs as its key findings:

> 1. PRIs in West Bengal are subject to sluggish and unpredictable devolution of funds.
>
> 2. Long term policy planning and implementation by PRIs is absent.
>
> 3. PRI offices at District and Block levels are understaffed. Existing staff has low skills and capacity, with faulty work distribution leading to a portion of staff being underutilised. Some line departments are understaffed and underfunded to the point of being redundant.

> 4. There are structural flaws in the PRI system due to an incomplete merger of the traditional bureaucratic set up and the Panchayat system of local government.[13]

The fourth point was elaborated further as follows:

> a. The offices of the District Magistrate at district level, the Block Development Officer at block level and the various line departments continue to be the *de facto* centres of power in local government systems. The Zilla Parishad and the Panchayat Samiti are in comparison poorly staffed and funded and are inadequately equipped to monitor bureaucratic service delivery in rural areas.
>
> b. There is role confusion between line departments and PRIs. Moreover, line department staff members are accountable to their parent offices and not to elected PRI representatives as their pay and terms of service lie outside PRI jurisdiction.
>
> c. Conversely, elected Standing Committees/Sthayee Samitis lack the power and the capacity to fulfil their mandated roles, particularly the role of monitoring the line departments and bureaucracy. Elected representatives, at all tiers, displayed a lack of skills, procedural knowledge and monitoring capability. Most representatives "rubber stamp" decisions taken by PRI heads like the Sabhadipati and the Sabhapati.
>
> d. There is a multiplicity of parallel bodies through which decisions are taken without consulting the Zila Parishad/ Panchayat Samiti/Gram Panchayat or their respective Standing Committees.
>
> e. PRI powers and functions are strongly centralised to the District Magistrate/Sabhadipati at district level, Block Development Officer/Sabhapati at the block level and the Pradhan at the Gram panchayat level.[14]

The study not only pointed out control by the district bureaucracy, it also pointed out towards bureaucratisation of the processes through which the PRI functioned. The report noted that the 'absence of a formal distribution duties combined with understaffing has left the ZP office prone to duplication of processes.'[15] One such example is the process through which the ZP

engineering section executes a community project by competitive tender bid. Once a project is approved by a Standing Committee and endorsed by AEO-ZP, the engineering section takes over the project after a contractor is selected through a tender. What follows is a Kafkaesque nightmare involving 20 steps and taking 160 days.[16]

Two years later, another study of GPs by Utpal Chakraborty, one of the faculty members of the State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development (SIPRD), made the following comment:

> Gram Panchayats are presently over burdened with government orders and circulars. In most of the cases they are not properly maintained. On the other hand very few office bearers are able to decipher the contents of the orders.[17]

Chakraborty has also pointed out that the government officials who are responsible for monitoring the GPs are either not performing or are not able to perform their duties properly. For example, in course of his field visits, he found that the Panchayat Audit and Accounts Officers (PAAO) are busier with other activities of the Block than looking after Panchayat accounts. Annual audit reports hardly ever lead to corrective measures from the Panchayat Samiti and the Block administration. In course of his field visits he did not find any example of the relevant officers—PDO, PAAO, BDO, SDO and DPRDO—ever visiting the Panchayats and providing valuable guidance and monitoring their activities.[18]

It is not surprising therefore that there was a significant gap in the capacity of the Panchayat functionaries. A study conducted by Panchayat Department on capacity building issues had this to say regarding the capacity of the functionaries in 2004:

> The field studies have revealed that most of the elected representatives, particularly those newly inducted into the system and most of the PRI employees as well as the Govt. employees functioning as members of Sthayee Samitis of ZPs & PSs and members of Upa-Samitis of GPs are not fully aware of the full structure, powers, functions, roles & responsibilities and inter-relationship of the 3-tier Panchayat system and of the accountability structure of the Panchayat system namely *Gram Sansad*, *Gram Sabha*, *Block Sansad*, *Zila Sansad* and the District Council. Most of the elected members of the Sthayee Samitis of ZPs & PSs and Upa-Samitis of GPs are also not aware of their roles and responsibilities and as such cannot discharge their responsibilities satisfactorily.[19]

Thus, even though we do not have detailed study of three decades of relationship between the Panchayats and the administration, the existing research clearly points towards the fact that the Panchayats have had an uneasy relationship with the older bureaucracy and had been to a large extent dependent on them for funds as well as guidance. The Panchayats also increasingly became vulnerable to bureaucratisation of their own processes. While significant policy changes were made and new institutions were created to improve the participation and transparency aspects of the Panchayats, there has been a gap in development of the capacity of the functionaries to perform their task adequately.

Interface between the Party and the Panchayats

Around the time the Left Front Government came to power, there was historic shift in its perceptions regarding the usefulness of the Panchayats for fulfilling the agenda of the Front. West Bengal under LFG was also the first state in India to introduce party based panchayats in all three tiers. It is not surprising therefore that the 'Party' would continue to play a significant role from behind in guiding and controlling the elected representatives. This aspect of the Panchayats of West Bengal has been fairly well-documented, although perhaps a comparison between Left ruled Panchayats and those which have been traditionally ruled by Congress would have explained better the peculiarities of Left intervention in the panchayats.

Harihar Bhattacharyya has noted a certain ambivalence in the stance on the Panchayats taken in the Party documents of CPI(M).[20] The CPI(M)'s West Bengal State Committee in a document said in 1994 that the role of the Party shall be to provide direction and guidance (*parichalona* in Bengali). The document then goes on to explain that 'this does not mean acting at will. It means activation of Panchayats in accordance with the principles and ideals of the party'.[21] In course of time at each level of the Panchayats, CPI(M) formed a Panchayat sub-committee which is the Party's '*parichalan*

committee'. Its activities have been defined as follows:

> All elected party members of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad will act under the respective committees. Generally, the local and zonal committees of the party will look after the Gram Panchayat [and Panchayat] Samities respectively. The final decision at each level will be taken by the Parichalan Committee of the Party, although the elected members may offer recommendations.[22]

This is however followed by certain cautionary notes which reflect the ambivalence in Party's thinking. For example:

> We must involve the people irrespective of all classes and creed in the activities of the Panchayat. The people of the area must be made aware of the fact that it is their money and work…If everything is concentrated in the hands of a few and people are kept in the dark then, even honest operation will also arouse suspicion in the eyes of the people…We cannot expect those who do not take part in decisions to carry out decisions. The process of decisions must start from the people.[23]

Bhattacharyya's empirical investigations in the districts of Bardhaman and Hoogly, led him to conclude that the decision of the Party, not the Panchayat members, is final and this was justified by Party functionaries as a necessary step to win the class struggle against vested interests in the rural society.

That the Party had the most important role to play in decision making was observed by Atul Kohli in the late 80s and by Moitree Bhattacharyya in 2002. Kohli observed that decisions at the GPs were made in consultation with the Party and the Party machinery supervised the activities of the Panchayats[24]. A decade later, based on a field work done in 1997, Moitree Bhattacharyya also came to the same conclusion. In the two GPs that she studied, in one case 60 per cent and in the other case 90 per cent of the respondents said that the decisions are taken by the Party representatives.[25] She has also shown that a provision was made in the 1994 Amendment of the Panchayat Act [Section 213(A)] according to which no member can cast vote against the wishes of the majority members of the GP elected from his party.[26] Thus, it is not possible for any individual

member belonging to a Party to vote differently from the other members of the same party, which in reality means that s/he cannot rebel against the party dictat unless all the members from his/her party in the GP stand united for that decision, which of course is almost impossible. A couple of years later, a research team from the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, found an interesting term in the field—the 'Pradhan Chalak'.[27] This literally means the person who makes the Pradhan move, referring to the invisible hand of the Party from behind. In another article published in 2009 based on ethnographic study of two villages in Koch Bihar and Malda districts, Rajarshi Dasgupta found a well-oiled CPI(M) 'machinery' running the show 'adept in formulating different strategies for different tiers of the panchayat system, calibrating their rivalries.'[28] Another micro-study published in the same year, by Manasendu Kundu, has corroborated the thesis of control of the Party over the Panchayats and said that the boundary between the Party and the Panchayat is 'ambiguous'.[29]

There is thus a clear consensus among scholars that the Party has dominated the Panchayats. The more complicated question is what has been the consequence? According to Moitree Bhattacharya, this has led to politicisation of rural life and the ordinary people of the villages try to stay away from the affairs of the Panchayats. She has quoted one veteran CPI(M) leader which perhaps deserves to be quoted again:

> In the initial years, i.e. late seventies and early eighties, the panchayats were more movement oriented, the tendency was to involve the mass of villagers into whatever activity it undertook. Although the party gave the leadership, common people were also part of it. It was the participation of people that enabled panchayats to deal so successfully with flood relief activities and rehabilitation works in 1978… In the later years, the nature of Panchayat politics changed—from movement politics to institutionalized politics. Now the panchayat have been reduced to mere institutions for implementing development activities.[30]

In course of her field work, she found very few respondents interested in the affairs of the Panchayat and most of them felt alienated from the institution. This lack of interest was also evident

in the poor attendance in the gram sansads and gram sabhas, which has remained a problem over the next decade as well.

In an essay, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has tried to explain the impact of the strong grip of the Party in terms of a theoretical formulation called the 'party-society'.[31] Modifying the concept of 'political society' proposed by Partha Chatterjee,[32] he says that in rural West Bengal 'political parties tend to displace other competing channels of public transaction—which made the rural situation ontologically different from the urban political society.'[33] Unlike other states in India, political parties transcend caste, religion or ethnicity based organisations. As a result, all disputes, familial, social or cultural, takes very little time to become partisan. This party-society has over the last three decades displaced the older patron–client form of relationships. Bhattacharyya argues:

> Land reform legislations and local government bodies (the panchayats) were the tools and the CPI(M) (as well as its peasant wing, the Krishak Sabha) was the primary agent to bring about this change. The new politics set new norms of transaction to which every political outfit—the ruling side as well as the opposition—had to conform, willingly or unwillingly. In this organizational grid … [the] political party was largely accepted as the chief mediator, the central conduit, in the settling of every village matter: private or public, individual or collective, familial or associational.[34]

Bhattacharyya does not think of the 'party-society' as simply a negative phenomenon. He says that it played a very important role in democratising rural politics in the early years of LFG. It freed the poor from dependency on the exploitative rich landed families, 'produced a governmental locality in the form of the village panchayat, and carried out numerous measures that enabled the underprivileged and the marginal to realize host of rights'.[35] Such positive impact of the early part of Left Front rule however did not last and was replaced by concern for electoral victory only. This meant that social stasis proved to be more alluring for CPI(M) than 'the uncertainties of expanding the democratic space.'[36]

One significant impact of the party-society of course has been the remarkable stability of Left Front over more than three decades. In a

study of the reasons behind such success, Pranab Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee and Abhirup Sarkar have tried, on the basis of a survey of 2,400 households spread in 88 villages of all districts of the state except Kolkata and Darjeeling, to answer this phenomenon.[37] On the basis of their survey, which included a secret ballot regarding voting preferences, they made the following observations. First, there is a clear association between voting for the Left and 'having less land, less education or belonging to SC or ST groups'. Second, 'the likelihood of voting for the Left increased with benefits received from programmes administered by previous Left dominated local governments.' Benefits that are recurring in nature (IRDP programmes, minikits, employment and relief programmes, etc.) had a positive correlation with voting for the Left rather than benefits that are one-time in nature (housing, supply of water, building of roads, provision for ration cards, etc.). In addition, informal help provided by GPs in overcoming difficulties in personal and familial matters were positively associated with voting for the Left. Third, 'improvement in agricultural fortunes between 1978 and 2004 were significantly associated with voting Left in Left dominated panchayats.'[38] Having said this, they have also found evidence of a 'clientelist' politics operating in rural society. For example, they have found that attendance in political rallies tend to fetch more benefits for the households. Also the fact that recurring benefits from the GP as opposed to the one-time benefits have more clear association with voting for the Left is also an indication of the development of such clientelist politics. In addition there was also a gratitude factor—Left rule has given the poor a sense of dignity which they did not have previously and hence they have consistently voted for the Left. The study has also claimed that such factors are much more important than the popularly believed idea that elections are regularly rigged in order to win votes. A very small percentage of respondents said that they faced trouble in voting.

We may note, however, that this study, or any other study for that matter, has not discussed the other fairly obvious explanation—lack of strong opposition parties capable of replacing the Left Front. There has been a steady erosion of Congress's organisational capacity resulting in the formation of the All India Trinamool Congress under Mamata Banerjee, which has split the opposition vote, whereas the Left Frontmanaged to stay united. This factor

perhaps needs to be taken into account especially if one has to explain the rise of the opposition since the 2008 Panchayat elections. In other words, some of the explanations of the political stability have to be found through studies of the nitty-gritty of electoral politics rather than simply explaining it in terms of the everyday politics of development. Congress during the 1980s and 1990s failed to impress upon the electorate that the schemes from which they were benefiting were coming from the Congress Government at the Centre and not from the Left run State Government. The data presented by the study on seats won by the Left Front in GPs between 1978 and 2003, similarly shows interesting ups and downs which perhaps do not reflect in the ultimate result as the opposition was not strong enough to capitalise on them. According to the figure presented,[39] the Left had around 70 per cent seats in 1978. This was followed by a sharp decline to about 60 per cent in the next election in 1983. In the next election it again went up to about 70 per cent. Since then, interestingly, till 1998, there has been a secular fall in share of seats to less than 60 per cent and then again the percentage went up to 70 per cent in the 2003 elections and then the proportion was reduced to 49 per cent in 2008 when the opposition was able to pick up significant issues and stand united. So between 1988 and 1998 the Left's fortune was falling but there is no clear explanation available as to why it then went up quite spectacularly. On the other hand there is no clear explanation either as to why in 1983 the Left's share of the seats actually went down from that of 1978 even though conventional wisdom tells us that the Left performed very well in these years.

People's Participation and Planning from Below

It has been mentioned in the above section that Harihar Bhattacharyya traced a certain ambivalence within the CPI(M)'s position regarding the Panchayats. On the one hand there were firm directives that the Party would be controlling the representatives and on the other hand there was also a discourse on involving the people and the people taking initiatives. Hence, along with the formation of what Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya calls a 'party-society', we also have narrative of participation and planning from below in the three decades of Left Front rule.

'Participation' is a term that however requires certain amount of clarification. We may understand the term in terms of: (a) participation of the electorate as voters; (b) participation of poor and marginalised and the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women in the Panchayats as members; (c) participation in the *Gram Sansad* and *Gram Sabha* meetings; (d) participation of people in decision making, and (e) participation in planning from below. Each may be seen as a progressively higher level of participation in the Panchayati Raj system.

(a) *Participation of the electorate as voters*: Surya Kanta Mishra, former Minister in Charge for Panchayats and Rural Development, has quite understandably proudly presented data on Panchayat elections in his book *Sreni Drishtibhongitey Panchayat*.[40] He said that while in the 'bourgeois' countries it is rare to see even 50 per cent voters turnout in their election, in case of the Panchayat elections of 1993 and 1998 the voter turnout has been more than 80 per cent.[41] This was also corroborated by a study by Girish Kumar and Budhadeb Ghosh.[42] We do not have any study which has looked into the voting data for the entire Left Front period, but generally speaking, it can be safely said that the voters' turnout has been high. The study by Pranab Bardhan *et al.* mentioned earlier has also shown that the electorate have had very few complains for electoral malpractice.

(b) *Participation of poor and marginalised as members*: The West Bengal Human Development Report of 2004 (henceforth, WBHDR) has quoted three studies to compile a profile of the representatives of the PRIs between 1978 and 1993.[43] The data is presented in TABLE 1.

The WBHDR says that landless and poor peasants constituted nearly 43 per cent of the GP members and this represents a break from the usual pattern in India where the rural elite have captured the Panchayats. The survey by Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, conducted on GP members elected for the term 2003–08, based on a sample of 162 GPs in all districts of the state, however shows a more complicated picture at the beginning of the twenty first century. The report concluded:

> …more than 25 per cent of GP members in most districts were landowning agriculturists, the proportion going up to 79.8

TABLE 1

Occupational Distribution of Panchayat Members[44]

S. No.	Occupation	1978–83	1983–88	1988–93
1	Landless agricultural workers	4.8	3.4	16.8
2	Bargadars	1.8	2.2	11.3
	Landless agri population (1+2)	6.6	5.6	28.11
3.	Cultivators below 3 acres	21.8	-	}
	Landless and marginal peasants (1–3 acres)		-	}30.17
4.	Cultivators (2–5 acres)	14.3	-	}
	Landless and small peasants (1–4 acres)	42.7	-	58.3
5.	Cultivators (5–8 acres)	6.6	-	}
6.	Cultivators (8–10 acres)	4.1	-	}28.5
7.	Cultivators (above 10 acres)	4	-	-
	Total owner cultivators (3–7 acres)	50.7	51.7	58.6
8.	Non-agri workers	3.9	2.3	2.4
9.	Unemployed	7.5	14.7	-
10.	Students	0.6	0.47	-
11.	Teachers	14	15.3	7.9
12.	Doctors	1.1	0.23	-
13.	Shop owners	1.4	6.7	9.4
14.	Others	14.2	3.0	1.57
15.	Total non-agri (8–14)	31.3	25.7	18.9
	Total	**100.00**	**100.00**	**100.00**

Source: WBHDR, p.49.

per cent in Purulia and 68.9 per cent in Uttar Dinajpur. However, the proportion was as low as 4.2 per cent in Howrah, 16.2 per cent in Birbhum and 22.4 per cent in Hooghly. In Dakshin Dinajpur and Birbhum, there were a significant proportion of GP members who were agricultural labourers. Interestingly, as much as 23.8 per cent of GP members in Jalpaiguri were in private employment, i.e. employed as workers in tea gardens. In North 24-Parganas and in Purba Midnapore, more than 10 per cent of GP members were in government employment. Also interesting is the fact that in as many as eight districts, more than 10 per cent of GP members were in some sort of business activity as their profession, the proportion being as high as 22.7 per cent in Howrah.[45]

It is unfortunately not possible to compare the data that has been presented in the WBHDR on 1978 and the CSSSC data presented on 2003 as sample sizes are different and also because the data presented by CSSSC is disaggregated into districts and does not show any state wide average. Also the CSSSC data does not divide the 'landowning agriculturists' according to the size of their holding. We can perhaps hazard one generalisation which is in agreement with the overall thesis of WBHDR that there has been a strong participation of the poorer sections of the society. However, in all probability, and this is not mentioned by the WBHDR, the agricultural labourers have not been significantly represented in the GPs as members. So in terms of participation as members, the small peasant has been more dominant than the agricultural labourers.

Regarding participation by Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and OBCs and on participation of women also we have only the CSSSC study which gives data on a large scale. The data is presented in TABLE 2:[46]

TABLE 2

Distribution of GP Members by Caste 2003–08

District	SC	ST	OBC	GENERAL
Malda	25.00	2.36	1.89	70.75
Purulia	23.08	36.69	15.38	24.85
Murshidabad	12.00	0.75	0.25	87.00
Birbhum	46.05	5.70	1.32	46.93
Uttar Dinajpur	28.15	1.48	3.70	66.67
Dakshin Dinajpur	33.91	32.17	4.35	29.57
Cooch Behar	67.96	0.00	5.83	26.21
Bankura	37.07	25.00	8.62	29.31
Jalpaiguri	32.80	35.20	1.60	30.40
Nadia	49.33	3.33	12.67	34.67
24 Parganas (S)	53.52	2.73	1.17	42.58
Purba Midnapore	27.13	0.00	3.72	69.15
Paschim Midanpore	28.71	22.97	3.83	44.50
Hooghly	40.74	3.09	1.85	54.32
Burdwan	35.71	8.57	1.90	53.81
Darjeeling	26.67	66.67	0.00	6.67
24 Parganas (N)	41.51	3.77	1.26	53.46
Howrah	28.68	0.00	5.43	65.89

Source: CSSSC, p.123.

The data reveals that the participation of the SCs, STs and OBCs is quite significant in all districts except where there is very little ST population, ST participation in terms of percentage is also low.

For participation of women also we only have the CSSSC data for 2003–08 that is giving us a picture on the basis of a significant sample size. The data is presented in TABLE 3.[47]

The data clearly shows that at least towards the end of our period women were becoming representatives as per the requirements set by the 73rd Amendment and in some cases their percentage is higher than the minimum required. However, statistic alone does not tell the complete story. This is because the women representatives are

TABLE 3

Distribution of GP Members by Gender 2003–08

District	Male	Female
Malda	60.85	39.15
Purba Midnapur	62.16	37.84
Murshidabad	61.65	38.35
Birbhum	62.56	37.44
Uttar Dinajpur	66.67	33.33
Dakshin Dinajpur	67.83	32.17
Cooch Behar	63.11	36.89
Purulia	50.00	50.00
Jalpaiguri	61.29	38.71
Nadia	60.93	39.07
24 Parganas (S)	60.94	39.06
Paschim Midnapur	62.68	37.32
Howrah	60.16	39.84
Bankura	62.28	37.72
Burdwan	61.54	38.46
Darjeeling	73.33	26.67
24 Parganas (N)	59.87	40.13
Hooghly	62.96	37.04

Source: CSSSC, p.123.

sometimes dictated from behind by their male family members. A study conducted by Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo observed that 43 per cent of their sample said that they were being helped by their husbands, and 'the interviewers are more likely to find the women hesitant, they are more likely to acknowledge that they did not know how the GP functioned before being elected and that they do not intend to run again.'[48]

Chattopadhyay and Duflo however have presented a positive picture of the impact of reservation for women and have noted some difference in the way women heads prioritise development work (for example, water over roads) and have also noted that

representation of women in *Gram Sansad* tend to go up when the GP is headed by women.[49]

(c) *Participation in the Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings*: The WBHDR has acknowledged that attendance in *Gram Sansad* meetings has been low and has been declining over the years.[50] A study of gram sansad meetings in 20 sansads of 3 districts by Maitreesh Ghatak and Maitreya Ghatak[51] found the average attendance to be about 12 per cent. Although once again detailed data is not available in any existing research, there seems to be a consensus that the *Gram Sansad* meetings are yet to become truly democratic forums where the poor can freely voice their opinion. The CSSSC study also came to the same conclusion:

> A majority of our respondents in most districts said that they never attend the meetings of the *Gram Sansad*. This figure is as high as 75.66 per cent in Murshidabad. On the other hand, the absentee rate was the lowest in the plains region of Darjeeling and in Paschim and Purba Medinipur. Most people said that they were unable to attend because they were not informed of the meeting (in Uttar Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad) or the timing of the meeting was inconvenient (most other districts). It is also significant that except in Dakshin Dinajpur and Purba Medinipur, only a small proportion of people actually know that there are two meetings of the *Sansad* every year.[52]

Thus, while we can say that the record of the Left Front is quite impressive when comes to voting percentage and percentage of representatives from disadvantaged sections of the society (SC, ST, women), the performance is less than impressive when it comes to their participation in the *Gram Sansad* where people actually have a chance to review and contribute to the workings of their GP. Let us now consider the fourth level of participation and ask how far the people are able to contribute to the decisions made in the *Gram Sansad* and how far the GPs are responsive to the demands that are raised in the *Gram Sansad*.

(d) *Participation of people in decision making of the GP*: The CSSSC study team asked the respondents whether beneficiary lists are modified as per the deliberations made at the *Gram Sansad* meetings. Their conclusion is as follows:

> We asked the GP functionaries whether beneficiary lists were modified at the *Gram Samsad* meetings after soliciting the views of the residents. Only in seven districts did more than 30 per cent of the respondents say that this was done. Most of the people said that beneficiary lists are prepared by GP leaders beforehand and the *Sansad* meetings are not generally seen as events where these lists can be seriously discussed.[53]

Another study, conducted by Debjani Sengupta and Dilip Ghosh,[54] in 2006–07, roughly came to the same conclusion:

> In gram sansad meetings the experience is that common people coming to the meetings mostly do not speak out. The gram panchayats also do not feel encouraged to make these people involved with the process. As illustration, the placing of income-expenditure report, budget of the gram panchayat and the latest report on the audit of the accounts of the gram panchayat can be cited. These important documents are rarely shared with the people.

Regarding the demands people make in the gram sansads the study made the following conclusion:

> In gram sansad meetings people raise many demands in the context of priorities in the local area... No reflection of the demands from gram sansads is generally made in the upa samiti meetings. The general body of the gram panchayat directly deals with these demands and takes necessary decisions. The role of upa samitis came only in implementation stage. Though in the frame-work of law it is stated that upa samiti will prepare budget and plan for the subjects entrusted, in practice this is yet to be followed. In course of dialogue with the coordinators (sanchalaks) of the upa samitis, it was felt that they were mostly not aware of the demands raised in different gram sansads of the gram panchayat.[55]

Among the respondents they interviewed, 45.6 per cent of the respondents felt that the decisions taken in the *Gram Sansad* meetings were implemented. While 81.4 per cent stated that they raised demand in the *Gram Sansad* meetings, only 27.4 per cent

were of opinion that their demands were redressed.[56] It is not difficult to see therefore why the enthusiasm regarding the *Gram Sansad* meetings is falling over the years. The voice of the people clearly hardly ever got reflected in the decisions made by the GPs. It may be mentioned here that sometimes the GPs also do not function on their own and merely implement schemes that are sent to them from above. A study by the Institute of Social Sciences on the utilisation of untied funds by the GPs, for example, has shown that GPs have spent less from the Untied Funds over which they have greater control than from the schematic funds they have received from above.[57]

We now proceed to discuss the fifth and highest layer of people's participation—where they plan for themselves.

(e) *Planning from Below*: CPI(M) in Kerala under the leadership of E.M.S. Namboodiripad carried out the first state-wide campaign on planning from below, which has become justifiably famous all over the world. The history of planning from below in West Bengal actually goes back to the early 80s and was the first in case of India. According to the WBHDR the districts of Medinipur and Bardhaman performed quite well but all districts were not equally good. WBHDR has accepted that from 1988 onwards there was a rollback and by mid-nineties most of the districts stopped the process.[58] We do not have any systematic research on the politics behind this rollback. Since mid-90s there was another effort at doing planning from below in 40 Blocks of the state, which was known as 'Convergent Community Action' (CCA). What is important to remember here is that at no stage did CCA become a people's campaign for planning like it did in case of Kerala. It was largely carried out by certain enthusiastic development practitioners, civil servants at various levels and some political persons but the Left Front did not give it the kind of big push that was required to make it a success even in these 40 blocks. We do not have any systematic study of the experience of CCA especially the political side of it. In 2004, Panchayat and Rural Development Department carried out a study to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the planning process in 18 GPs of 13 Blocks in 5 districts.[59] The report acknowledged a gap in terms of 'social acceptance' where it noted that 'participation is still to be assured in decision making and transparency is needed'[60].

The CCA process at this stage was largely abandoned and was replaced by another effort at planning from below which was part of the SRD programme which was initiated in November 2005 after a piloting in six GPs earlier. With support from British Government initially it was started in 304 GPs in six backward districts[61] of Purulia, Birbhum, Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, Murshidabad and Malda and later scaled up to about 800 GPs in 12 districts. This effort was largely driven by the contractual project staff and civil servants responsible for the project and was restricted to the *Gram Unnayan Samiti* and GP level and had no integration with the planning process at the Block and District level. The Block and District mainstream administration largely remained aloof from the process. More importantly, neither the Left parties, nor the opposition parties took any active interest in the process although at the grassroot level some political leaders were involved. At best the political parties did not create any hindrance. However, in spite of the best efforts of the project staff, it was a far cry from the people's campaign of Kerala. Left Front was at this stage, following the victory in the 2006 Assembly Elections, more interested in industrialisation through private corporate capital. Strengthening participation of people through planning from below was less of a priority. This had disastrous consequences for the Left in the next Panchayat elections in 2008 and Lok Sabha elections in 2009.

To sum up this section therefore we may say that the during the Left Front period 'participation' in the form of voting percentage and representation of SC, ST and women as elected representatives has been quite healthy. Higher levels of participation, such as participation in *Gram Sansad* meetings, participation in the decision making process of the GP and participation in planning from below has not been as impressive as perhaps it could have been.

We now move on to a discussion on the literature regarding the role of the Panchayats in poverty reduction.

Panchayats and Poverty Reduction

Any analysis of poverty reduction by the Panchayats has to cope with certain methodological problems. While it is possible to say how far poverty has decreased during the Left Front period, it is

difficult to ascertain exactly how far this is because of the role played by the panchayats. All factors which affect poverty are not in control of the panchayats but in the hands of departments specialising in agriculture, health or education. There is also a lack of systematic official data trying to track the impact of the tied and untied funds routed through the panchayats over the last three decades. Given this complexity, we may take note of some of the studies which have addressed the issue.

The best defense of the achievements LFG has been presented by two former civil servants of the Panchayats Department, Dr. M.N. Roy and Dilip Ghosh.[62] Roy and Ghosh have argued that if one compares the percentage of population below poverty line in 1973–74 with 2004–05 then one can see the following decrease in percentage of population below poverty line in case of West Bengal and India:

TABLE 4

Decline of Poverty in India and West Bengal 1973–04 to 2004–05 (in percentage)

Year	India	West Bengal
1973–74	55.4	73.2
2004–05	28.3	28.6

Thus 44.6 per cent of the population of West Bengal went above the poverty line during this time, a percentage that is only marginally lower to that of Kerala which stood at 46.00 per cent. In all-India terms this was the second best performance after Kerala. The all-India average is 28.1 per cent. Thus the two states where Panchayati Raj has been strongly implemented the percentage of poverty reduction has been the highest.

Regarding the role of the Panchayats in this story of poverty reduction, the authors pointed out the following areas: (a) creation of rural infrastructure through various poverty alleviation programmes; (b) distribution of minikits for farmers; (c) increase in wages of agricultural labourers from 1980 onwards; (d) improvement of drought prone areas and mitigation of floods; (e) provision of rural housing for the BPL category; and (f) various social security programmes for the BPL families. The authors have

also provided detailed data on fund flow during the 8th, 9th and 10th Five-Year Plan periods and the achievements from such fund flow. To this we can perhaps add that at least in late 1980s G.K. Lieten had observed in an ethnographic study carried out in Birbhum district that LFG's intervention in the rural society through land reform and Panchayti Raj had led to a new sense of dignity among the poor peasantry vis-à-vis the rural rich.[63]

How far were the funds to which Roy and Ghosh had referred to able to reach the targeted population? Was there widespread leakage and did the elite capture the funds that were meant for the poor? In a study of 89 villages spread over 15 districts, Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee tried to find answers to these questions.[64] Based on a data covering the period from late 70s to late 90s, the authors concluded that 'average levels of targeting and land reform effort was quite high' although land that was distributed was only about 3–8 per cent of cultivable land and one in seven households were benefited from the programme. Leakage of IRDP programmes was minimal (4 per cent) and 87 per cent of the minikits went to the landless and small land-owning households. Thus, 'the West Bengal panchayats directed a significant portion of benefits of different developmental and poverty alleviation programmes to the poor'.[65] Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar, based on their analysis in early 1990s came to the same conclusion regarding targeting of IRDP schemes. In their opinion, 'most beneficiaries were from the target group, and transaction costs of obtaining the loan were relatively small. This was in contrast to other parts of India where the beneficiaries were often the well off relatives of panchayat officials, and intended target groups faced high transactions cost including the bribing of officials.'[66] On the other hand Ross Mallick[67] has argued on the basis of a Government of India report [68] and an essay by Madhura Swaminathan[69] that there was no significant difference between other states and West Bengal.

The overall positive assessment by Bardhan and Mookherjee, however, according to the authors themselves needs to be qualified in some important respects. The authors 'consistently found that targeting performance was poorer when the land distribution became less equal, the poor was less literate, when there was major low caste households, and local elections were less contested.'[70] Moreover, 'political biases were more significant in the allocation

of resources across villages, rather than within villages'.[71] In other words, where villagers were of low caste and lacked literacy they tended to lose out from the benefits of the panchayats as they were not able to voice their demands adequately. Similarly absence of political competition meant that the panchayats were less scared of favouring their own supporters. Finally, the targeting by the gram panchayats was probably much better than the targeting of the upper two tiers.

The discourse on poverty in West Bengal needs to be qualified in three other important ways. First, although there is no significant study on this, the Left Front Government was not able to arrest the regional imbalance that had emerged during the Congress era. In

TABLE 5

Poverty Ratio of Different Districts (1999–2000)

S. No.	District	Poverty Ratio (in percentage)
1.	Darjeeling	19.66
2.	Jalpaiguri	35.73
3.	Koch Bihar	25.62
4.	Dinajpur	27.61
5.	Malda	35.40
6.	Murshidabad	46.12
7.	Birbhum	49.37
8.	Bardhaman	18.99
9.	Nadia	28.35
10.	North 24 Parganas	14.41
11.	Hooghly	20.43
12.	Bankura	59.62
13.	Purulia	78 .72
14.	Medinipur	19.83
15.	Haora	07.63
16.	24 Parganas (S)	26.86

Source: WBHDR, p.80.

other words, the rural areas of the district adjoining Kolkata are in general much more prosperous that the districts in the north and the dry regions of the west. Some evidence of this is presented in the WBHDR. According to a table (TABLE 5)presented in the report based on NSSO 55th round (1999–2000), we can see wide variation in the rural poverty ratio of the districts.[72]

It can be seen that whereas a district like Bardhaman has a poverty ratio of 18.99, the ratio is as high as 78.72 for Purulia, both interestingly, consistently ruled by the Left.

Third, based on the NSSO 61st round data the state government accepted towards the end of Left Front era that 9 per cent of the population of the state does not get adequate food.[73] This corroborated the findings of the Rural Household Survey that 16.5 per cent of the population finds it difficult to arrange two meals a day throughout the year. A programme called State Assistance Against Hunger and Inequality (SAHAY)has been since then launched to address the problem but implementation has been less than impressive.

Thus, one can perhaps say that the impact of the panchayats on poverty has been a positive one but there are substantial dark spots within this bright story.

Panchayats and Changing Patterns of Rural Class Structure in West Bengal

Did LFG manage to create any transformation of rural class structure in West Bengal through its programmes over the last three decades? Suryakanta Mishra makes the claim that this has been the case.[74] Scholars such as G.K. Lieten have argued that there has been a fundamental transformation in the sense that the poor are no more afraid of the *dapot* (domination) of the rural rich.[75] There cannot perhaps be any doubt that the kind of zamindar/*jotdar* domination that was found in the pre-Left Front period had disappeared to a large extent by the end of 1980s.

The more significant question is who therefore became powerful in the rural areas as the dominant class? N. Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay pointed out in their report in 1993 that the 'Panchayats brought in a middle-category of society into key positions, many of them school teachers…power has yet to travel

to the lower levels.'[76] A similar conclusion was reached by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya[77] and Aril Engelsen Rudd[78]—the rise of CPI(M) also saw the increase in power of the teachers in the rural society. Bhattacharyya further argued that CPI(M) leaders coming from the middle-peasantry and the school teachers excelled in a certain form of 'politics of middleness', that is, 'a consensus evoking unifying politics of mediation between several sectional interests'. In other words, what CPI(M) practiced through the Panchayats was not a classical class struggle on behalf of the rural proletariat but rather a certain kind of mediatory role with the key objective of winning elections and staying in power. Roughly similar argument was made by Dipankar Basu in 2001.[79] Basu echoed what Ross Mallick[80] had said earlier—through CPI(M) and the Panchayats the rural middle class consolidated its position at the expense of the landless. Mallick has also quoted a field study by Ranjit Kumar Gupta which claims that '…Socially the Leftist leadership in rural areas is connected to the rural power structure by kinship and affinity: they were no strangers elevated to power. Often the family struggle took a political shape and often it was within the rural power elite a struggle for power between two relatives.'[81] Barbara Harriss-White through her work on the agricultural markets has commented that many of the erstwhile elite have continued to remain powerful through their control of the rural markets.[82]

We can perhaps conclude on the basis of such studies that by mid-90s Left Front achieved a partial shift in rural power structure towards poorer sections of the society but not a complete transformation of class relations. The rural middle class were better placed to take advantage of the changes than the landless poor. Was there been any substantial shift between mid-90s to 2008? We unfortunately do not have substantial research on class relations during this time. However the recent essay by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya where he has coined the term 'party-society'[83] seems to suggest that power structure in the twenty first century agrarian scenario cannot quite be understood in strictly class terms. The party seems to be the ruling elite rather than any particular class and party is not simply hegemonised by any particular class. Partha Chatterjee has agreed with Bhattacharyya on this.[84] Chatterjee thinks that there has been a significant change in the last decade or so. The conditions of agricultural production have changed along with the

growing significance of non-agricultural activities. This has generated demands on the party at the local level which the party now has to fulfill. Chatterjee has also pointed out that one of the crucial tasks of the political management of the rural society is now to manage illegalities, an issue on which there is very little research. Here 'party' plays a significant role in distributing benefits and mediating conflicts. For example, more people may be included in a publics works programme at less than minimum wage without the official records showing the discrepancy. Similarly, almost all road side markets are regulated politically and not legally. In case of white collar jobs such as teaching and government jobs are controlled by the party. According to Chatterjee, 'West Bengal has never seen Weberian ideal where the state holds a monopoly over legitimate violence.' On the contrary the political mediators have always controlled violence, or the threat of it, as a significant resource 'to be deployed in the task of building consensus and keeping peace.' This instrument can be used effectively if their use is more as a threat and can be kept localised and limited. This in turn, according to Chatterjee, requires a certain moral legitimacy as the local leader. In recent times, Chatterjee notes, this credibility is on the decline and 'it is this that signals the coming crisis in West Bengal.'

The Fate of SRD

To end let me return to the SRD project with which I started the chapter. Personally, it gave me many friends, an opportunity to work inside a department and see rural West Bengal extensively during my field visits. I also got an opportunity to visit Kerala and Karnataka to see their Panchayat system. The project was more or less successful in the first two years thanks to the hard work put in by the team. As a result it was extended to several other districts after two years. A roadmap for reforms was prepared and passed by the cabinet, satellite based training facilities for the districts were set up, a TV programme and a radio programme was started to disseminate information, new training materials were produced and training methods were developed and financial management systems were improved. Several important studies on the panchayat system of West Bengal was finished and submitted to Government of West

Bengal. The district offices of the project overcame initial resistance from the traditional bureaucracy and slowly became valuable assets to the district administration although the staff continued to remain contractual and hence permanently insecure. The project team also helped the department to improve monitoring and evaluation systems, most notably by helping to prepare the self-evaluation formats for three tiers of the Panchayat system.

However there were two important failures on part of Government of West Bengal. The roadmap document remained only a document as the Left Front lost the 2011 election and the new TMC led government did not implement the roadmap. Similarly the recommendations made by the various studies conducted under the programme were also not implemented.

Second, the system of bottom-up decentralised planning that was introduced in the project was not taken up as a state-wide policy and the entire experiment (which was the most expensive part of the project) came to nothing in the end. This was not the fault of the project but rather the fault of the Government of West Bengal. After 2011, also the system of planning was not taken up by the new regime. Thus West Bengal missed another chance to replicate the Kerala experience and achieve a rigorous decentralised form of planning.

In 2011, the project came to an end. A new project, this time supported by the World Bank, was initiated known as Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats Project (ISGPP).[85] However, the aim of this project was not to support the weak GPs but to support the best GPs of the state which were mostly in the advanced districts or involving the better GPs of the poorer districts. The GPs which were receiving support from the SRD project suddenly found themselves back to square one. In 2012, I visited Hura GP in Purulia district which was one of the pioneering GPs as far as decentralised planning was concerned. I found a confused GP Pradhan. He was not sure whether to do planning according to the SRD methodology or according to the traditional method of scheme-wise planning.[86] Gram Unnayan Samities also expressed their anguish that what they had learnt for the last three to four years they would not be able to continue. After the 2013 election to the PRIs, which TMC swept, Gram Unnayan Samities were no more formed although not officially desolved.

Notes and References

[1] In terms of the official documents of the project, it aimed at achieving four 'outputs'. They were: (i) effective preparation and implementation of a roadmap and linked policy actions to deepen rural decentralisation; (ii) PRIs, line departments and support institutions will have the institutional framework and capacities to operate more effectively in their decentralised roles; (iii) pro-poor participatory planning, implementation and monitoring systems will be established across PRIs; and (iv) resources will be enhanced and utilised for pro-poor local development in a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable manner.

[2] The West Bengal Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Administration) Rules, 2004.

[3] The West Bengal Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Accounts, Audit and Budget) Rules, 2007.

[4] Government of West Bengal, *Report of the Third Finance Commission of West Bengal*, Kolkata, 2008.

[5] Ibid., p. 23.

[6] Ibid., p. 27.

[7] Ibid., p. 40.

[8] Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay, *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats: A Report for the Government of West Bengal*, Government of West Bengal, Department of Panchayats, 1993, p. 7.

[9] Ibid., p. 7.

[10] Ibid., p. 8.

[11] Ibid., pp. 21–22.

[12] Panchayats and Rural Development Department, *Report on the Pilot Study on Organizational Issues*, Government of West Bengal, 2005. Unpublished.

[13] Ibid.., pp. 5–7.

[14] Ibid., pp. 5–7.

[15] Ibid., p. 49.

[16] Ibid., p. 50.

[17] Utpal Chakraborty, *Gram Panchayats in Action: A study of Some Critical Issues*, Panchayats and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal, Unpublished, 2007, p. 7.

[18] Ibid., p. 9.

[19] Panchayat and Rural Development Department, *Report on the Post-Design Study on Capacity Building of SRD*, Government of West Bengal,

Unpublished, 2004, p. 36.

[20] Harihar Bhattacharyya, *Micro-foundations of Bengal Communism*, Ajanta, New Delhi, 1998, pp.110–34.

[21] Ibid., p. 110.

[22] Ibid., p. 111.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987

[25] Moitree Bhattacharyya, *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralism*, Manak, New Delhi, 2002, p. 176.

[26] Ibid., p. 176.

[27] Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, *SRD Programme: Design of Purpose-level Indicators and Baseline Measurement in West Bengal Districts*, Report submitted to Department for International Development, UK, 2006, p. 129.

[28] Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The CPI(M) "Machinery" in West Bengal: Two Village Narratives from Koch Bihar and Malda', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV(9), 28 February—6 March, 2009, p. 80.

[29] Manasendu Kundu, 'Panchayati Raj or Party Raj? Understanding the Nature of Local Government in West Bengal' in B.S. Baviskar and George Mathew (eds), *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India*, SAGE, New Delhi, 2009, p. 126.

[30] Moitree Bhattacharyya, *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal*, Manak, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 183–84.

[31] Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Of Control and Factions: The Changing 'Party-Society' in Rural West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV(9), 28 February –6 March, 2009, pp. 59–69.

[32] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most parts of the World*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004.

[33] Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Of Control and Factions: The Changing 'Party-Society' in Rural West Bengal', p.60.

[34] Ibid., p.68.

[35] Ibid., p.69.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Pranab Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee, and Abhirup Sarkar, 'Local Democracy and Clientelism: Implications for Political Stability in Rural West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV(9), 28 February—6 March, 2009, pp. 46–58.

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[39] Ibid., p. 47.

[40] Surya Kanta Mishra, *Sreni Drishtibhongitey Panchayat* (Panchayat through the Class Perspective), National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1998, pp. 47–58.

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[42] Girish Kumar and Budhadeb Ghosh, *West Bengal Panchayat Elections 1993: A Study in Participation*, Institute of Social Sciences and Concept, New Delhi, 1996.

[43] Government of West Bengal, *West Bengal Human Development Report*, Kolkata, 2004, p. 49.

[44] The 1978–83 data is from a study conducted by the economic and planning section of the Development and Planning Department of the Government of West Bengal. The sample consisted of 100 gram panchayats. The 1983–88 data is from a study conducted by Panchayat Department of the Government of West Bengal. The sample consisted of 200 gram panchayats. The 1988–93 data from survey by G.K. Lieten. The sample consists of eight gram panchayats in Birbhum District. It may be noted that the sample is too small in case of the 1988–93 data to arrive at definite conclusions for the state.

[45] Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, *SRD Programme: Design of Purpose-level Indicators and Baseline Measurement in West Bengal Districts*, 2006, p. 125.

[46] Ibid., p.123.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ragahbendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, 'Impact of Reservation in Panchayati Raj: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomized Experiment', *Economic and Political Weekly,* XXXIX(9), 28 February–5 March, 2004, p. 983.

[49] Ragahbendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, 'Impact of Reservation in Panchayati Raj: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomized Experiment', *Economic and Political Weekly,* XXXIX(9), 28 February, p. 982.

[50] Government of West Bengal, *West Bengal Human Development Report*, Calcutta, 2004, p. 67.

[51] Maitreesh Ghatak and Maitreya Ghatak, 'Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System of West Bengal: Towards Greater Participatory Governance?', *Economic and Political Weekly,* XXXVII(1), 5–11 January, 2002, p. 50.

[52] Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, *SRD Programme: Design of Purpose-level Indicators and Baseline Measurement in West Bengal Districts*, 2006,

p. 148.

[53] Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, *SRD Programme: Design of Purpose-level Indicators and Baseline Measurement in West Bengal Districts*, 2006, p.150. Since 2008, the beneficiary lists of schemes are computer generated from the Rural Household Survey data by the Panchayat Department and hence this has further eroded the role of the Gram Sansad.

[54] Debjani Sengupta and Dilip Ghosh, 'A Study of the Gram Panchayats in West Bengal: Their Responsiveness to Demands Made at the Gram Sansad', in Alok Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Satyabrata Chakraborty, and Apurba Kumar Mukhopadhyay (eds), *Gram Panchayats in West Bengal: Institutional Capabilities and Developmental Interventions*, Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal, Vol.1, Unpublished. p.394.

[55] Ibid., p.379.

[56] Ibid., p.398.

[57] Institute of Social Sciences, *A study on Utilisation of Untied Funds by the Gram Panchayats in West Bengal*, Report submitted to Panchayats and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal, 2007, p. 35.

[58] Government of West Bengal, *West Bengal Human Development Report*, Calcutta, 2004, p. 55.

[59] Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal, *Evaluation of Panchayat Planning and Implementation Experience in West Bengal*, 2005.Unpublished.

[60] Ibid.. pp. 7–10.

[61] The backward districts were taken on the basis of the District Development Index developed by Government of West Bengal.

[62] M.N. Roy and Dilip Ghosh, 'Daridro o Panchayat: Paschimbanger Obhigyota' (Poverty and Panchayat: The West Bengal Experience), *Panchayatiraj*, June 2008, pp. 13–25.

[63] G.K. Lieten, *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal* Sage, New Delhi, 1992.

[64] Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee, 'Poverty Alleviation Efforts of Panchayats in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXIX(9), 28 February—5 March, 2004, pp. 965–73.

[65] Ibid., p. 972.

[66] Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar, 'Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal' in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (eds), *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 156–57.

[67] Ross Mallick, *Development Policies of a Communist Government: West Bengal Since 1977*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 148.

[68] Government of India, Department of Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, *Concurrent Evaluation of IRDP: The Main Findings of the Survey for January 1987–December 1987*, New Delhi, 1988.

[69] Madhura Swaminathan, 'Village Level Implementation of IRDP: Comparison of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu', *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 31, 1990, p. A–25.

[70] Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee, 'Poverty Alleviation Efforts of Panchayats in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXI (9), 28 February, 2004, p. 972.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Government of West Bengal, *West Bengal Human Development Report*, Calcutta, 2004, p. 80.

[73] *See* http://wbprd.gov.in, *(accessed 4 January 2010).* http://wbprd.gov.in/HtmlPage/sahay_homepage.aspx. Checked on 4.11.2014.

[74] Surya Kanta Mishra, *Sreni Drishtibhongitey Panchayat* (Panchayat through the Class Perspective), National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1998, pp. 65–71.

[75] G.K. Lieten, *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*, SAGE, New Delhi, 1992.

[76] Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay, *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats: A Report for the Government of West Bengal*, 1993, pp. 38–39. Government of West Bengal, Kolkata.

[77] Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Politics of Middleness: The Changing Character of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Rural West Bengal', in Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White and Sugata Bose (eds), *Sonar Bangla: Agricultural Change in Rural West Bengal and Bangladesh*, SAGE, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 279–300.

[78] Arild Engelsen Rudd, 'From Untouchable to Communist: Wealth, Power and Status among supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Rural West Bengal', in Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White and Sugata Bose (eds), *Sonar Bangla: Agricultural Change in Rural West Bengal and Bangladesh*, SAGE, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 253–78.

[79] Dipankar Basu, 'Political Economy of "Middleness": Behind Rural Violence in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 21, 2001, pp. 1333–44.

[80] Ross Mallick, *Development Policies of a Communist Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 149.

[81] Ranjit Kumar Gupta, *Agrarian West Bengal, Three Field Studies*, Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, Calcutta, 1977, p. 45.

[82] Barbara Harriss-White, *Rural Commercial Capital: Agricultural Markets in West Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

[83] Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Of Control and Factions: The Changing 'Party-Society' in Rural West Bengal', 2009.

[84] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Coming Crisis in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV(9), 28 February—6 March, 2009, pp. 42–45.

[85] See http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2010/03/11944468/india-west-bengal-institutional-strengthening-gram-panchayats-isgp-project-environmental-social-management-framework for details. Last checked on 04.11.2014.

[86] Scheme-wise planning refers to separate planning for each rural development scheme, most important of which is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS). SRD planning on the other hand refers to a more elaborate process of doing sector-wise planning (health, education, etc.) and finding funds for activities under different schemes. The latter was aimed at a more holistic development of the GP area and gave people of GP the opportunity to some extent to exercise their own opinion as to what should be done for the development of a GP. In case of the former, the GP only acts as an implementing agency of the schemes prepared by the Central and state governments.

5

The Story of the 'Backward Villages' and Some Questions on Hunger, Media and Democratic Governance

Hunger Deaths at Amlashol

On 10 June 2004, West Bengal's leading Bengali daily, *Anadabazar Patrika*, reported that five persons have died of hunger and malnutrition in an obscure village named Amlashol.[1] Amlashol was located in the Belpahari Block of Medinipur district (now Paschim Medinipur). The issue was taken up by all leading dailies of the state and became a major concern in the political circles. By end of the month the matter was taken up in the Legislative Assembly by the opposition and the house was adjourned due to opposition protests on June 30.[2] This issue remained a major rallying point for the opposition but did not have any impact on the 2006 Assembly Election.

The deaths at Amlashol brought into sharp media focus that after six decades of independence and several progressive initiatives by the Left Front government since 1977, there were many people in the state who were vulnerable to poverty and hunger. Earlier in 2002, a BPL survey was conducted which showed, as per official estimates, 45.52 lakhs (1 lakh = 100,000) people were below the poverty line. In 2004, the West Bengal Human Development Report (WBHDR) was published. This report also concluded that although poverty in the state has been decreased over the years, there has been sharp inter-district disparity which has left some district in the grip of poverty. The report also pointed out maximum human

development had taken place in and around Kolkata. Meanwhile in 2002 Government of India had launched the Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana, a centrally sponsored scheme, to address the issue of poverty in 150 selected districts of the country.

It was however increasingly felt that identification of vulnerable zones needed to be narrowed down to the village level rather than remaining confined to the district or block level. However given the large number of villages in the state (around 40,000) it was difficult to physically identify such villages. Therefore after several rounds of trial and error it was decided by Government of West Bengal to focus on the Census 2001 data and analyse it in terms of two proxy indicators: (a) female literacy rate; and (b) percentage of non-workers and marginal workers. The assumption was that if a village shows low female literacy and low level of employment then that village is likely to be vulnerable to poverty.

On the basis of such assumptions a computer-based analysis was carried out on the Census data of 2001 and a list of 4,612 villages were identified by the Panchayats and Rural Development department. These villages were spread over 1140 Gram Panchayats in 245 Blocks of the state (out of 341 blocks). The villages identified met the following criteria:

- Over 60 per cent of the population belonging to the working age group are either with no work or are marginal workers.
- Over 70 per cent of the women are illiterate.

The choice of 60 per cent for the first case and 70 per cent for the second case was not based on any statistical logic but was based on administrative experience of the officials of the department. The total population of these 4,612 villages was 4,567,907 or approximately 8 per cent of the total population of the state. Concentration of such villages were found to be more, as expected, in the districts with low Human Development Index as identified by the WBHDR. In order to re-validate the findings of the Census based analysis a more detailed analysis was carried out with certain additional parameters. These were:

- Percentage of SC/ST population (greater than 50 per cent was valid).
- Agricultural labour ratio in the agricultural workforce (greater than 50 per cent was valid).
- Non-agricultural worker ratio in the total workforce (less than 30 per cent was valid).
- Approach road (foot/mud valid).
- Communication (nil was valid).
- Health Centre (nil was valid).
- School (nil or primary valid).
- Nearest town (greater than 3 kms was valid).
- Bank/Credit Society (nil valid).

It was found that after re-validation the error margin was less than 1 per cent except in Malda (2.6 per cent) and Murshidabad (7.85 per cent). Thus appropriate changes were made.

The identification of the backward villages was indeed a significant achievement. Following this identification, letters were sent by the Panchayats and Rural Development department to district officials and zila parishads to carry out a baseline survey of the villages and give priority to interventions in these villages. The district officials also initially took the issue with enthusiasm and for some time baseline surveys as well as interventions were carried out. The state government also allocated a budget for targeted interventions in the backward villages of the state in the budget of 2006–07. However by 2006–07, that is, two years after Amlashol and the identification of the backward villages, interest of the district administration had begun to wane. The allocated budget was left largely unutilized as several districts failed to give project proposals. The matter had also become less important to the media and therefore had less political significance. In any case, in 2006 the Left Front won a massive victory in the state and therefore the urgency of the matter was reduced.

THE STUDY[3]

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, I joined the Panchayats and Rural Development Department in January 2006 as the Research and Studies Coordinator of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation Project. After a few months the file on research was initiated. It was decided by the Project Director and approved

by the Principal Secretary and the Minister-in-Charge, Dr Surya Kanta Mishra. Eight studies were planned of which the study on backward villages was one of them. It was also decided that a mixed team of academicians and civil servants will used in all the studies. This was a good decision as academicians have the technical knowledge of research while civil servants often have valuable knowledge of field realities and government systems.

In order to arrive at the methodology of the study on backward villages several meetings were held and for sampling purposes a statistician was consulted. What is worth appreciating is that there was no attempt to produce a pro-government report. The team had full freedom to carry out its study without any political intervention. Seven districts were purposively chosen in keeping with their low HDI status—Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia and Pashchim Medinipur. In each district the Blocks which have at least 10 backward villages were chosen. For each such selected Block one backward village was chosen through simple random sampling. Thus, 92 villages were chosen for the household survey. Households in the villages were selected through systematic random sampling. In all, therefore, 3,815 households were selected for the survey. The task of survey was distributed amongst North Bengal University, Vidyasagar University, Visvabharati University's Palli Charcha Kendra, and RDK College, Murshidabad. Each of the survey teams under these universitites were placed under an academician of that institution. Survey data was digitized through a professional IT firm.

Apart from the survey the research team carried out field visits in the selected villages and interacted with GP, Block and District level officials. Thus every effort was taken to ensure that the study was of the highest possible standard.

Let me now briefly discuss some of the important dimensions of the backward villages that came out from the study.

Socio-economic Roots of Backwardness

The study sought to understand certain socio-economic aspects of the villages which create a condition of backwardness. Specifically it looked at: (i) sources of livelihood; (ii) irrigation; (iii) credit supply;

(iv) low income-expenditure level; (v) education; and (vi) health facility. These categories should not be treated in isolation but should be seen as inter-linked strands of a condition of backwardness. Also, while these six categories can be seen as general ones, it is also necessary to note that there was a wide variety of specific local issues that make the backwardness of one region different from another.

The first aspect of these villages that became evident was that the inhabitants were overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture as their source of livelihood (see TABLE 5.1).

TABLE 5.1

Primary Source of Income for the Households

Districts	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Bankura	30.87	44.16	0.86	1.35	4.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	8.12	9.96
Birbhum	31.73	52.69	0.85	0.85	0.00	2.27	0.00	0.00	1.13	10.48
D. Dinajpur	24.57	61.59	2.77	0.00	3.81	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	7.27
Murshidabad	26.69	36.37	4.62	1.69	4.95	2.70	5.86	3.04	3.15	10.92
P. Medinipur	40.85	48.32	1.32	0.88	3.95	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.69
Purulia	52.51	10.76	1.15	1.00	3.30	0.00	0.00	0.00	13.92	17.36
U. Dinajpur	15.19	70.99	1.93	0.28	5.80	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	5.80
All Respondents	**33.56**	**41.81**	**2.03**	**1.05**	**4.01**	**0.78**	**1.27**	**0.66**	**4.77**	**10.03**

Source: BVWB, p. 108.

Note: A = Farming in one's own land; B = Wages from agricultural labour; C= Share Cropper's Share of Crops; D= Salary from Government Service; E = Domestic Help; F = Wage from Stone Quarry, Crusher; G = Biri Making; H = Mason's wage; I = Labourer of different kinds; J = Other.

It can be seen that the overwhelming majority (77.40 per cent) of the respondents worked in agriculture related professions, either as small farmers or as agricultural labourers. In TABLE 5.2, we shall see what the land-holding size is for the common farmer.

It can be seen that nearly 32 per cent of the respondents did not have any land. They had to work as agricultural labourers or had to earn their income from a portfolio of unskilled or semi-skilled

TABLE 5.2

Landholding Size[4]

Districts	0	0–0.4 bigha	0.5–1 bigha	1–2 bigha	2–5 bigha	> 6 bigha	Other
Bankura	35.89	3.77	10.47	24.72	17.60	1.12	6.42
Birbhum	41.36	3.40	9.26	12.65	15.74	5.25	12.35
D.akshinDinajpur	29.72	3.85	16.78	19.23	20.98	6.99	2.45
Murshidabad	40.27	4.97	8.14	10.68	11.52	1.06	23.36
Paschim Medinipur	17.34	7.32	26.40	20.62	13.87	0.00	14.45
Purulia	11.99	3.45	9.45	20.84	32.68	7.95	13.64
Uttar Dinajpur	54.06	6.72	15.41	12.32	6.44	0.00	5.04
All respondents	**31.97**	**4.74**	**12.71**	**17.40**	**17.27**	**2.83**	**13.05**

Source: BVWB, p. 109.

activities. Among those who have land except for Purulia, where soil quality is poor, the majority have less than 2 bighas of land. This means that there was a severe shortage of land for the farmers. Only 2.83 per cent of the cultivators said that they had more than 6 bighas of land. Our field work showed that in some cases a small number of families owned a large amount of land. This was particularly evident in Hajidanga village of Baharampur Block in Murhsidabad where the 'jotdar' system was still prevalent and virtually the entire village was controlled by one absentee landlord. On the other hand in the dry tribal areas of Birbhum for example, families some time had a fair amount of land but they were not able to grow crops on the land because of poor soil quality and lack of irrigation. However, on the whole the general picture of the households we surveyed showed that holding size is not ideal for large-scale capitalist or socialist farming which can increase productivity and hence income.

It can be seen in TABLE 5.3 that in none of the districts the involvement of the households in cottage industry had reached 40 per cent and in case of all respondents it is as low as 23.98 per cent. The highest was of course Murshidabad which is due to the presence of the *Biri* industry. *Biri* making is, however, hazardous to health. It was a matter of serious concern particularly because the people

TABLE 5.3

Whether the Household is Involved in any Cottage Industry

District	Yes	No
Bankura	24.30	75.70
Birbhum	10.80	89.20
D. Dinajpur	27.62	72.38
Murshidabad	39.64	60.36
P.Medinipur	25.24	74.76
Purulia	6.00	94.00
U.Dinajpur	22.69	77.31
All respondents	**23.98**	**76.02**

Source: BVWB, p.111.

in the backward villages are generally undernourished. We saw in Murshidabad that the poor women sit in row outside their houses during their leisure time to make *Biri*s and the children surround them. It is very likely that they fell prey easily to lung-related diseases.

Role of the State and Civil Society Organisations to Propagate New ideas of Livelihood Generation

Our field visits clearly demonstrated that in almost all the villages there are bamboo trees. But only in one village we found that the some villagers have the skill to make bamboo products. This showed that both the state as well as civil society organisations (NGOs, Krishak Sabha, etc.) failed to understand what the specific problems of the villages are and how alternative sources of livelihood can be generated from locally available resources. We didn't see any example of low cost alternative farming or kitchen garden. Agricultural practices were outmoded and the farmers were not aware of appropriate seeds that might improve productivity or reduce cost. The state's effort was restricted to mechanical implementation of centrally sponsored schemes.

We also did not find many NGOs working in these villages, a fact that was corroborated in the survey (see TABLE 5.4).

Thus, it can be seen that the majority of the villagers was dependent on agriculture but the size of cultivable land was small

TABLE 5.4

Whether there Exists any NGO in the Village

Districts	Yes	No	Do not know
Bankura	4.19	66.62	29.19
Birbhum	0.31	82.72	16.98
D. Dinajpur	0.00	81.47	18.53
Murshidabad	19.98	54.23	25.79
P.Medinipur	0.96	68.40	30.64
Purulia	1.80	67.92	30.28
U.Dinajpur	2.52	64.43	33.05
All respondents	**6.00**	**67.00**	**27.00**

Source: BVWB, p. 112.

and there was hardly any supplementary source in the form of a thriving cottage industry. Paucity of livelihood options therefore acts as a major cause of poverty and backwardness of the villages.

Insufficient Irrigation Facilities

If small size of cultivable land was one of the major problems, then the other problem was dependency on monsoon and inadequate irrigation facility. We wanted to know from the respondents whether they got irrigation facility or not. The results have been provided in TABLE 5.5.

Even if we assume that the error margin is 20 per cent we get a dismal picture. The result was shocking in case of Purulia and Uttar Dinajpur. We next asked the respondents who have land whether they considered the irrigation facility they got to be sufficient or not. The results have been provided in TABLE 5.6.

The sources of irrigation in the villages include supply through the irrigation channels constructed by the government and the privately owned shallow tube wells. As can be seen, in none of the sample districts even 50 per cent of the respondents said that they are satisfied with the irrigation facility that is available to them. In case of Murshidabad the result was different because there were many big water bodies in the district. Also Murshidabad is not a

TABLE 5.5

Whether the Respondents get Irrigation Facility or Not

Districts	Yes	No
Bankura	17.18	82.82
Birbhum	22.53	77.47
D. Dinajpur	60.49	39.51
Murshidabad	21.99	78.01
P. Medinipur	17.73	82.27
Purulia	1.80	98.20
U. Dinajpur	6.44	93.56
All respondents	**18.45**	**81.55**

Source: BVWB, p. 113.

TABLE 5.6

Whether Irrigation is Sufficient or Not

Districts	Sufficient	Not Sufficient
Bankura	22.76	77.24
Birbhum	23.29	76.71
D. Dinajpur	42.20	57.80
Murshidabad	48.56	51.44
P. Medinipur	40.22	59.78
Purulia	41.67	58.33
U. Dinajpur	13.04	86.96
All respondents	**37.5**	**62.5**

Source: BVWB, p. 113.

drought prone district. But the irrigation facility being insufficient, the poor farmers buy water from the privately owned shallow tube wells at high price. Even there shallow tube wells were run by diesel as electricity was yet to reach many backward villages. All these increased the cost of production. This becomes evident from TABLE 5.7.

TABLE 5.7

Whether the Household has to Purchase Irrigation Facility

Districts	Yes	No
Bankura	59.35	40.65
Birbhum	65.75	34.25
D. Dinajpur	97.69	2.31
Murshidabad	77.88	22.12
P. Medinipur	82.61	17.39
Purulia	16.67	83.33
U. Dinajpur	91.30	8.70
All respondents	**78.26**	**21.73**

Source: BVWB, p. 114.

It was found that except in Purulia the percentage of respondents paying for irrigation is very high. The reason why the percentage of 'no' is high in Purulia and Bankura is that there were not many sources from which water can be purchased any way. This indicated that marginal farmers found it very difficult to get adequate supply of water for agriculture. Hence it was not uncommon, as we saw in Uttar Dinajpur, not to cultivate or to hand over land to the big farmers for a rent since such small-scale agriculture is not considered viable. In other words a reversal of land reform was taking place.

Inadequate Reach of Banks, Credit Cooperatives and SHG based Micro-finance

Credit is an integral part of rural economic and social life. It is an essential component of the agrarian economy and survival of the rural families. One of the ambitions of post-colonial India's rural development was to reach out to the poor with low interest rate credit through banks and credit cooperative societies. The survey however found that 43.64 per cent of the households were taking credit from moneylenders whereas only 7.71 per cent were taking credit from Banks.

In recent times microfinance through SHG has been seen as another major strategy. However the data collected for the study

clearly showed that the villagers were overwhelmingly dependent on the private money lenders and neighbours for their credit. If we look at the total percentage for Banks, Credit Cooperative Societies and SHG it was only 18.77 per cent. In order to understand the reach of the SHG movement in these villages we tried to find out whether any member of the household was a member of an SHG or not. The result has been depicted in TABLE 5.8.

TABLE 5.8

Whether any Member of the Family is a Member of a SHG

Districts	Yes	No
Bankura	33.80	66.20
Birbhum	53.40	46.60
D. Dinajpur	56.64	43.36
Murshidabad	12.37	87.63
P.Medinipur	21.58	78.42
Purulia	30.73	69.27
U. Dinajpur	21.29	78.71
All respondents	**28.49**	**71.50**

Source: BVWB, p. 116.

TABLE 5.8 shows that the percentage in Birbhum and Dakshin Dinajpur was comparatively higher although the percentage of families uncovered under the any kind of SHG programme was in general is quite high. This means that the activities of the SHGs were largely restricted to savings and taking loan was rare as is evident from TABLE 5.7 (4.35 per cent). Taken together the above two tables clearly show that microfinance had not yet weakened the hold of the moneylenders. Our survey did not given a clear picture of money lending rates. However, our field visits to 22 villages showed that the minimum rate was 60 per cent while the maximum rate was 120 per cent. This is where the failure of institutional credit becomes significant as those who could get loan from banks got it at 7 per cent. They were usually the well-off sections of the society.

Low Income—Expenditure Level

Any data on income or expenditure of a household cannot be completely reliable. Hence in addition to questions on income and expenditure we asked some proxy questions regarding material of the roof, fuel for cooking and how many full-meals the villagers got. The assumption was that if the picture of the villages generated by these proxy indicators is consistent with the level of income and expenditure shown by the more direct questions, then it would mean that the statement regarding the income and expenditure was fairly accurate. The survey showed that the majority of the houses had roofs built with straw, or tin with straw being the majority. This indicates that the villagers do not have the resource to build a pucca house. The increasing use of tin in the backward villages in recent times can be attributed to the realisation that it has greater longevity than straw and thus became cost effective. Our interaction with the villagers in course of focus group discussions also revealed that the villagers prefer to buy tin, even if it involves greater expenditure initially. The fact that 47.39 per cent continue to have straw houses showed that they were unable to make the investment needed for building a tin roof.

Similarly, the data on fuel used for cooking showed that the majority of the respondents use cow dung or dry leaves or wood for cooking which was indicative of their low income status. It should be clarified that the use of dry leaves is a part of the tradition of cooking in many of the villages. The dry leaves are also available free of cost in terms of the government order in the areas where the Forest Protection Committees are in existence. In some cases however the women of the households had to travel far to collect the dry leaves. This added to their burden. Let us now consider the data on income and expenditure in Table 5.9.

The data in Table 5.9 reveal that the majority of the respondents earned and spend between Rs 500 and Rs 1,500 per month. The sorry state of affairs presented above may be further illustrated if we try to understand how many full meals the respondents got. The result is discussed in Table 5.10.

Our field work showed that poor people do not always answer this question correctly and tend to say 'two' or 'three' even when they actually get one as they feel shy of talking the hard truth about

Table 5.9

Monthly Family Income and Expenditure

S. No.	Range of Monthly Family Income (Rs) and expenditure	Number of Respondents Showing Income	%	Number of Respondents Showing Expenditure	%
1.	< 500	80	2.09	0	0.00
2.	500–1000	1908	50.01	1887	49.46
3.	1000–1500	997	26.13	971	25.45
4.	1500–2000	382	10.01	395	10.35
5.	2000 - 2500	145	3.80	229	6.00
6.	> 2500	0	0.00	69	1.80
7.	Other	254	6.65	206	5.39
8.	No data	49	1.28	60	1.28
	Total	**3815**	**100**	**3815**	**100**

Source: BVWB, p. 118.

Table 5.10

Number of Full Meals Family Members Get in a Day

District	No Meal	One Meal	Two Meals	Three Meals	Four Meals	Other
Bankura	0.28	26.12	52.65	15.92	3.77	1.26
Birbhum	0.00	8.33	79.63	8.95	0.00	3.09
D. Dinajpur	0.00	43.01	56.99	0.00	0.00	0.00
Murshidabad	0.21	18.08	67.02	7.82	0.00	6.87
P.Medinipur	0.00	7.90	74.37	8.48	0.00	9.25
Purulia	0.00	10.49	80.81	6.45	0.00	2.25
U.Dinajpur	0.00	22.13	76.47	0.00	0.00	1.40
All respondents	**0.10**	**18.29**	**68.93**	**7.96**	**0.70**	**3.98**

Source: BVWB, p. 119.

it. Nonetheless it is interesting to note that 18.29 per cent of the households said that they get only one meal per day. During our field visits we tried to understand exactly what a 'meal' consist of. The answer is that the villagers usually ate only fermented rice with water *(paanta bhaat)* and occasionally with some pulses and some vegetables. This was, needless to say, not likely to give the villagers adequate nutrition for performing labour-intensive work for long hours. The lack of nutritious diet lead to anemia and made the villagers disease-prone. Despite all these the poor villagers had to toil hard for mere survival.

The income–expenditure figures can be best understood if we locate them in the context of the family size. We found that family size was around 5–6 members per family. Thus for a family of five to six the average income was mostly around Rs 500–1,500 per month. We may also note that 2,763 out of 3,815 respondents, that is, 72.42 per cent of the respondents reported that they have no money to save.

These figures indicate low level of income of the respondents who had to work hard for survival. Our field visits showed that those who have been able to migrate, especially outside Bengal have occasionally managed to increase the income level of the family but the rest are able to barely survive on the basis of seasonal migration to more developed regions of the state, such as Bardhaman or Hooghly. The situation in these villages clearly showed that land reform and decentralization have not generated pro-poor economic growth in all the areas of the state.

Literacy

Educational backwardness is now an accepted indicator of poverty and lack of human development and hence we considered it to be an important cause of backwardness of these villages. Let us consider the results from the survey. The break-up of educational qualification of the respondents has been provided in Table 5.11.

To reiterate, our sample was chosen through systematic random sampling and the only specification that we gave regarding respondents was that they have to be adults (18+). Hence, there is a fair chance of the level of illiteracy being representative. It is evident from the table above that 55.01 per cent of the respondents belonged

to the category of 'cannot read and is not able to sign' or in other words are completely illiterate. The field visits, without much exception, revealed for instance, that the Continuing Education

TABLE 5.11

Educational Qualification of the Respondents

Educational Qualification	Number	Percentage
Cannot read and are not able to sign	2,099	55.01
Only able to sign	44	1.15
Can read and are able to sign	697	18.12
Didn't complete Primary Education	9	0.23
Completed Primary Education	323	8.46
Between Class V to Class VII	25	0.65
Completed Class VIII	255	6.68
Passed Madhyamik	152	3.98
Appeared in Madhyamik but failed	47	1.23
Passed Higher Secondary	41	1.07
Graduate	32	0.83
Masters Degree	4	0.10
Data not clear	87	2.28
Total	**3,815**	**100**

Source: BVWB, pp. 120-21.

Centres, Village Education Centres and the SSKs were almost non-existent in the villages. In many villages the outer walls of the schools contained the slogan of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) but there was little evidence of implementing the spirit of the campaign. Our survey revealed that in Murshidabad district, for instance, 63.7 per cent of the respondents said that they do not have an adult education centre in the villages while 64 per cent of them said that there was no VEC in the village. No less important, 73 per cent of the respondents had not heard of the Shikshya O Swasthya Upasamity, the body of the Gram Panchayat responsible for education and public health. The percentages for the same in Dakshin Dinajpur and Uttar Dinajpur were 76.9 and 72.2 (due to lack of adult education centres)

respectively, 79.6 and 54.2 (lack of VECs) and 87.7 and 82.9 (due to lack of Shikshya O Swasthya Upasamity) respectively. While there is no dearth of government schemes to attack illiteracy and ensure primary education the percentage indicates the deficiency or the failure of the functionaries to effectively implement them and more importantly, sustain them.

Having seen the data on the overall literacy level, let us consider the literacy level of the female respondents. There were 808 female respondents in all in our survey. The educational qualifications of them are presented in TABLE 5.12.

TABLE 5.12

Educational Qualification of the Female Respondents

S. No.	Educational Qualification	Number	Percentage
1.	Cannot read and are not able to sign	610	75.49
2.	Can read and are able to sign	103	12.74
3.	Has completed primary education(Class IV)	31	3.86
4.	Completion of intermediate (ClassVIII)	17	2.1
5.	Completed Madhyamik Examination	77	0.86
6.	Appeared in Madhyamik Examination	44	0.49
7.	Passed Higher Secondary	0	0
8.	Other	32	3.96
9.	No data	4	0.49
	Total	**808**	**100**

Source: BVWB, p. 122.

It can be seen that a staggering 75.49 per cent of the respondents were illiterate. Thus our examination of socio-economic roots indicated that the villagers were trapped in an economy that was

based on small-landholding based agriculture, where irrigation was inadequate and expensive, where the money lender remained powerful, where the income-expenditure level was low and majority of the villagers were illiterate. In other words the root of backwardness lay in the absence of modernization of the economy.

Inadequate Health Facility and High Expenditure on Healthcare

The State and Central government since independence in 1947 has built up a huge infrastructure of state-sponsored health service for the poor in rural areas. In West Bengal there is a separate Department of Health and Family Welfare for delivery of health services which runs state sponsored health facilities from the GP to the district level. There are Sub-centres, Health Centres, Sub-divisional Hospitals and District Hospitals. Apart from this under the Integrated Child Development Scheme, all children up to 5 years of age are provided nutrition through the "Aanganwadi" centres. Various international agencies such as UNICEF are also trying to improve immunization of the children. Several NGOs such as Child In Need Institute (CINI) and West Bengal Voluntary Health Association (WBVHA) have been trying to improve the health situation of the villages. This has no doubt resulted in substantial improvement of the situation at the state level over the years but in our study villages we found that the health situation was bad. Let us look at some important features in TABLES 5.13, 5.14 and 5.15.

It can be seen from Table 5.13 that fever and diorrhoea were the two most common diseases but the incidence of TB had gone down significantly. Similarly malaria, once the scourge of the countryside of West Bengal, had gone down with the exception of Purulia where 20 per cent of the respondents identified Malaria as a common disease in the village. On the other hand common diseases like fever (influenza) continued to create a nagging problem for the poor. These diseases were usually waterborne and we found from field visits that although there were tube wells in the villages, the surrounding area was poorly maintained which resulted in contamination. In cases where wells were the primary source of drinking water, we did not come across a single incident where they

were covered. When we asked the villagers why was it that they have not covered it themselves we found that their expectation was that the government/state (*sarkar*) would do it.

TABLE 5.13

Diseases in the Respondent Families

S. No.	Type of Disease	Percentage for all Members	Percentage for Children
1.	Fever	48.71	10.44
2.	Diorrhoea	40.24	65.53
3.	Measles	-	11.82
4.	Breathing trouble	-	7.15
5.	Philera	00.57	-
6.	Malaria	4.77	0.24
7.	TB	1.67	-
8.	Jaundice	0.59	0.59
9.	Other	2.77	4.24

Source: BVWB, p. 124.

TABLE 5.14

Preference of Health Service Provider

S. No.	Type of Health Service provider	Percentage
1.	Hospital	45.96
2.	Sub-centre	12.23
3.	Private doctor	5.20
4.	Quack doctor	35.21
5.	Take care ourselves	0.49
6.	Other	0.88
	Total	**100**

Source: BVWB, p. 125.

TABLE 5.14 shows that the villagers had very little trust in the

sub-centre which was created with the idea that basic medicine would be provided to the rural poor from a centre which is close to their village. However we can see that the choice of the villagers was either to take the patient to the Hospital or to take them to the quack doctor.

TABLE 5.15

Person Responsible for Child Delivery

S. No.	Type of Health Service provider	Percentage
1.	Midwife	49.49
2.	Midwife (with formal training)	3.07
3.	Neighbour	9.20
4.	Family members	11.63
5.	Auxiliary nurse and maid	11.61
6.	Doctor	0.21
7.	Hospital	12.85
8.	Quack doctor	0.19
9.	Other	0.19
	Total	**100**

Source: BVWB, p. 125.

In case of child birth, it is clear that the state supported system was not able to reach the poor. The traditional practice of midwife was preferred by nearly 50 per cent and neighbours and family members constituted another 20 per cent. The fact that 20 per cent of the child births were not done by even traditional midwives is quite alarming. During our field visits we came to know that there are occasions when getting a midwife becomes difficult and the job of delivering a child has to be done by a completely untrained person. Awareness regarding schemes such as Janani Suraksha Yojana for safety of pregnant mothers was also lacking.

We wanted to know from our respondents how far the Primary Health Centre is from the village. As the table below shows, in nearly 30 per cent case the distance is more than 7 km. It is to be borne in mind that the condition of the road is very often quite bad

which makes traveling that distance difficult (see TABLE 5.16).

TABLE 5.16

Distance of Primary Health Centre

S. No.	Distance of the Primary HealthCentre	Percentage
1.	0–2 km	22.76
2.	2–5 km	29.62
3.	5–7 km	18.09
4.	> 7 km	29.51
	Total	**100**

Source: BVWB, p. 126.

TABLE 5.17

Whether There is any ICDS Centre in the Village

S. No.	District	Yes	No
1.	Uttar Dinajpur	53.50	46.50
2.	Dakshin Dinajpur	65.03	34.97
3.	Murshidabad	66.49	33.51
4.	Birbhum	25.00	75.00
5.	Purulia	76.76	23.24
6.	Bankura	60.61	36.88
7.	Paschim Medinipur	72.25	27.75
	All	**63.12**	**36.88**

Source: BVWB, p. 127.

Similarly, we tried to find out whether there is any ICDS Centre in the village. It can be seen that the result is moderately positive. However, in most districts and in many villages we found that there are equal number of people saying 'yes' and 'no'. Thus in order to ascertain in which villages there was no ICDS centre we tried to find out the number of villages in case of which at least 80 per cent of the respondents had said 'No'. We have found that in 21 out of

92 villages (22.82 per cent) at least 80 per cent of the respondents said that there is no ICDS Centre in the village. We assume that this means there was either no ICDS centre in the village or the ICDS

TABLE 5.17.1

Whether the Aanganwadi Worker Comes Regularly or Not

S. No.	District	Yes	No	Don't Know
1.	Uttar Dinajpur	75.39	14.14	10.47
2.	Dakshin Dinajpur	91.94	1.64	6.45
3.	Murshidabad	86.47	6.84	6.68
4.	Birbhum.	75.31	0.00	24.69
5.	Purulia	90.23	5.86	3.91
6.	Bankura	81.11	10.37	8.53
7.	Paschim Medinipur	92.53	5.86	3.91
	All	**86.42**	**6.56**	**7.02**

Source: BVWB, p. 127.

coverage was not enough for the village. We saw that in case of certain big villages there was ICDS centres but not in every *para*. Thus, we can say that the reach of the programme was not adequate.

Having studied the human development factors contributing to the backwardness of the study villages, we may consider whether any particular social group could be identified with the narrative of backwardness.

THE SCHEDULED TRIBES: A CASE OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

STs constitute 5.5 per cent of the population of West Bengal but it is now widely accepted that their situation is much worse than that of the SCs. Hence, it is worthwhile to examine the data related to STs and backward villages (see TABLE 5.18).

Clearly, even though the respondents were chosen through systematic random sampling which means that there was equal probability of all castes to be a respondent, 30 per cent of the respondents have turned out to be ST although the state average for ST is only 5.50 per cent. Thus, the STs were particularly

TABLE 5.18

Number of Backward Villages with more than 50 per cent ST

S. No.	District	Total BVs	No. of BVs with > 50%	%	% ST in the districts
1.	Bankura	569	190	33.39	10.36
2.	Bardhaman	55	21	38.18	06.41
3.	Birbhum	218	89	40.82	06.74
4.	D. Dinajpur	185	76	41.08	16.12
5.	Darjeeling	85	49	57.64	12. 69
6.	Haora	4	0	00.00	0.45
7.	Hugli	21	2	09.52	04.21
8.	Jalpaiguri	79	58	73.41	18.87
9.	Cooch Behar	26	1	03.84	0.57
10.	Malda	602	188	31.22	16.84
11.	Medinipur	646	395	61.45	P. Medinipur –14.87; E. Medinipur – 0.60
12.	Murshidabad	242	17	07.24	1.29
13.	Nadia	59	1	01.69	2.47
14.	24 Parganas (N)	2	0	00.00	2.23
15.	Purulia	994	342	34.06	18.27
16.	24 Parganas (S)	66	1	01.51	1.23
17.	U. Dinajpur	760	43	05.65	5.11
18.	West Bengal	4612	1474	31.96	5.50

Percentage of ST – Census 2001,Backward Village related data –primary survey.

Source: BVWB, p. 129.

disadvantaged and there was a clear relation between backwardness of these villages and the presence of STs.

Having seen that a particular social category, the STs, have significant concentration in the backward villages let us now try to see whether there was any definite geographical pattern in this regard.

Geographical Roots of Backwardness

It has been pointed out earlier that the backward villages were spread in all districts of the state. It was however not possible to pin-point in a map each and every backward village. We therefore opted for an indicative map. Figure 5.1 presents the location of the all the blocks which had at least 10 backward villages. It can be seen that there existed a clear positive correlation between adverse geographical condition and concentration of backward villages. The map clearly shows that uneven development unfortunately generated two West Bengals - one that is relatively prosperous and the other that is backward.

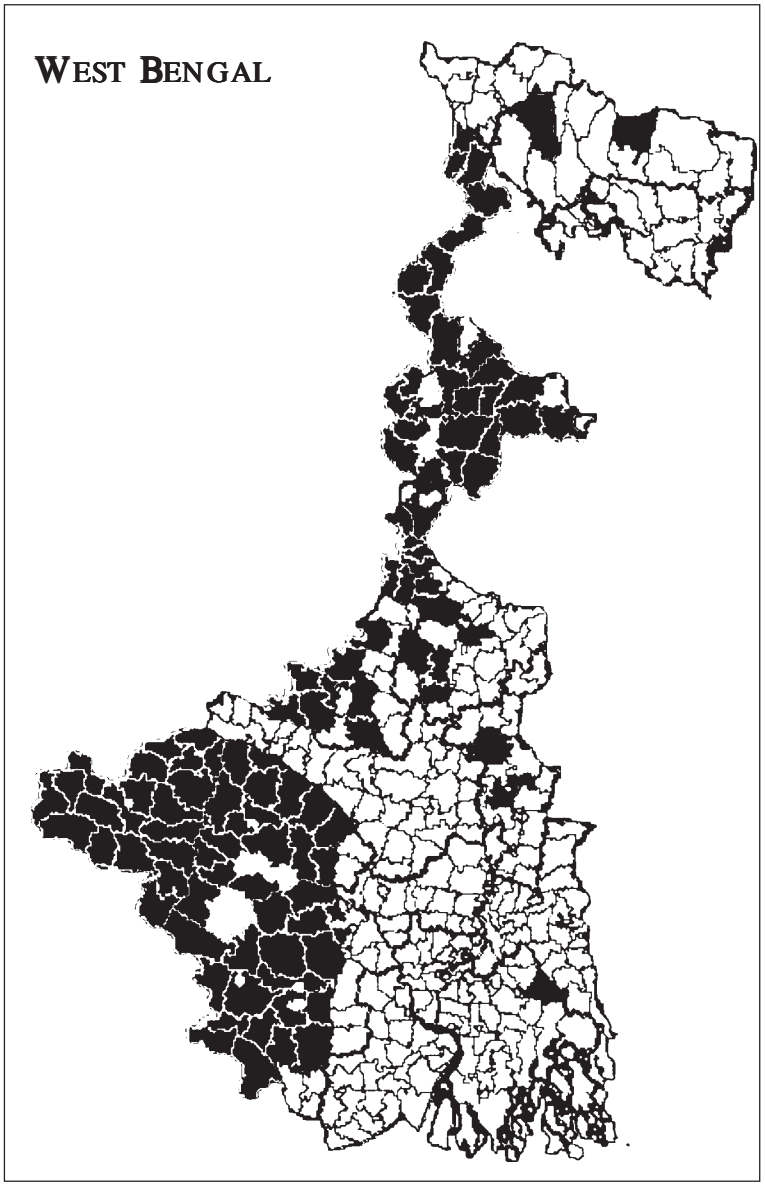
I may also point out here that we tested a hypothesis that the backward villages are located far away from the District or Block or GP headquarters. In other words, their backwardness was a result of their remoteness. Our survey experience however proved otherwise. There were backward villages both near as well as far away from the district/block headquarters.

Local Roots of Backwardness

In this section I take up certain examples of specific factors that explained the backwardness of certain regions within the overall structural explanation presented above. This is presented in the form of case studies of certain villages.

Backwardness and Flood

Khargram block in Murshidabad district consisted of 128 villages of which 22 were declared backward villages. There were 12 GPs in the block. Total population of the block was 234,715, out of which 59,315 were SC and 3,268 were ST. The discussion with the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Joint BDO, the Block Relief Officer, Sub Assistant Engineer and Sabhapati who was a member of CPI(M) Party, may be summarised as follows:



Map not to scale

Figure 5.1: Map showing blocks with at least 10 backward villages

- Election duty and flood relief duty ate up much of the time of the Block officials hampering development work.
- Corruption was on the rise.
- The Block/Panchayat Samity could never raise its voice vis-à-vis the district and there was no grievance redressal mechanism.
- The biggest problem that the Block faced almost every year was flood which affected 160 Mouzas (Revenue Village) approximately. Seven GPs remained completely submerged till November and three remained partially submerged.
- Lot of time was also taken up by endless number of meetings which reduced the time available for development work.

On 22 March 2007 we reached the Sadal GP office accompanied by the B.D.O of Khargram. There we could interact with the Panchayat Pradhan, Atiul Rahman and a few key functionaries. Along with them some villagers actively involved in the SRD related planning activities work were also present on the spot, who enlightened us on certain important issues and problems.

According to the information provided by them there were 13 villages in the said GP of which 10 were listed backward villages. In the perception of the Panchayat members the most acute problem of the entire GP every year was the overflowing of river Dwarka that leads to flooding of the 7 out of the 10 backward villages. The rest of the three backward villages were, however, partly affected (with about 75 per cent of the areas being submerged). The backward village of Sankarpur (sample village for our survey) fell under the second category. The 11-km long embankment on the river Dwarka, according to them, has failed to prevent the floods. Repeated written complaints lodged to the Irrigation Department for the improvement of the drainage system also remained unheard. Due to the heavy rainfall resulting in flood the reliance on Bodo (winter paddy) cultivation was more than that on the Aman (paddy cultivation in the rainy season). Hence, even in fertile land only one crop was possible. All the backward villages within the GP were located at an average distance of about 4 kms which indicates their easy accessibility. Again, out of a total road length of about 42 kms, only 19 kms of roads were unmetalled *kuchcha* roads, the rest being either pucca or semi-pucca. Almost all the villages except for one

had telephone facilities. Almost the entire GP area was electrified except for just four backward villages.

In course of the conversation it came out that most of the residents of the GP are agricultural labourers. But due to the regular occurrence of floods every year, agriculture fails to ensure the availability of food for the people throughout the year. Therefore, many people migrate to places such as Bardhaman and Birbhum to be engaged as agricultural labourers. Some of them also migrated to far-off places like Mumbai and Moradabad between July and November in search of work. Others, however, worked locally either as rickshaw-pullers or as fishermen. Information gathered on the educational system gave us a mixed picture. While primary schools and SSKs were present in almost all the villages in the GP, the high drop-out rates and low enrolment rates in the backward villages did not create much hope. Health scenario too was no better because of the inadequate number of primary health centres and doctors. Although NGOs, SHGs and ICDS centres could be found in many villages within the GP, much remained to be done in respect of building up the general level of awareness of the people and empowering them to face all social and economic odds. The different Government sponsored schemes meant for the poor such as the MGNREGS[5], PROFLAL[6], NOAPS[7] and Tribal Pension schemes had failed to reach the target groups. Only IAY[8] and the AAY[9] schemes seem to have been helpful to them. The ration dealers were creating problems by keeping with them the ration cards for the beneficiaries. In the opinion of the GP members and the Panchayat Pradhan one of the most glaring problems that resulted in social as well as economic backwardness of the entire GP was child marriage and trafficking in women.

Village Sankarpur

Sankarpur was a densely populated village with the total population being 7,941 (4,073 men and 3,868 women). It was predominantly a Muslim village with 94 per cent of the total population being Muslims. The village was well-connected to the GP office by a semi-pucca (morum) road. Availability of drinking water was facilitated by tube-wells. The village was found to have telephone as well as mobile phone facilities. Parts of the village did not have electricity.

A large part of the village had cultivable land (about 290 acres). However, owing to the lack of adequate irrigation facilities, only single-cropping could be practiced. Due to the occurrence of floods *Aman* (the monsoon crop) was not cultivated by poor farmers and *Bodo* (the winter crop) was heavily relied upon. The overall health scenario was far from satisfactory. There was no health centre in the village. Except for only one quack doctor there was no doctor in the village who had a MBBS degree. Fever and diorrhoea were common diseases among the villagers. The nearest health centre was the Khargram Hospital which was quite far away. Due to the lack of general public awareness of health and hygiene, none of the houses had toilet facilities. But different SHG group members in the village were taking initiatives for generating sanitary awareness among the masses living in the area. There was only one primary school in the village. Mid-day meals were provided to the children. There were two SSKs but no high school. Interestingly there was not even a Madrasa.

Despite the existence of 22 Grade-1 SHGs and an NGO in the area, people were still lagging far behind in respect of their political awareness for want of proper education. We gathered from the local people that the NGOs were not actively involved in developmental tasks. The members of the SHGs strongly feel the need for proper governmental aid and training in necessary skills for the upliftment of the village economy. People were found to have little information about the different government schemes for poverty eradication. Therefore, very often the benefits failed to reach the targeted groups.

The above narrative is a fairly typical one and does not make the case unique. Nonetheless they need to be told as they give us a snapshot of the development related problems of the village. What we found in course of our field work was that the central problem of the village does not lie within the village but in the nearby river. When we went to see the river we saw that the situation was aggravated by heavy silting which had made the bed of the river shallow. There was also the problem of channeling the excess water and this was intensifying flood every year. The other side of the river fell under another block and hence the Khargram block officials were unable to cut a channel through a part of that Block in order to reduce the load. There were land disputes because of which land

could not be acquired for creating channels. Apart from the physical devastation done by it the flood also destroys the principal paddy crop and this resulted in heavy indebtedness of the people in the hand of the moneylenders. This created a vicious circle of poverty from which there was almost no escape. Those who were able to migrate during the monsoon months were relatively better off and were able to cope with the crisis of livelihood options. Migration thus was a fairly common phenomenon in the village. People migrated to districts like Murshidabad but also to faraway places like Mumbai and Moradabad.

A Case of Social Exclusion of Tribals

On a hot summer day we reached Murarai I Block Office in Birbhum District to discuss the problems of the backward villages. The major outcomes from the Focus Group Discussion which took place at the Block Office with BDO, PDO and other Block officials were as follows:

- The backwardness of the backward villages can be attributed to the inability on part of the villagers of these villages or their representatives to claim the benefits they are entitled to.
- Lack of good roads prevents regular visit of the officials to the villages. There is no alternative to agriculture but agriculture also is not adequate to provide livelihood.
- Majority of the backward people are STs.
- Implementation of schemes is ad hoc. The solution lies in the creation of holistic plans for the block.

From the block office we reached the Mohurapur Gram Panchayat in the afternoon. This Gram Panchayat is located only a few kilometers from Jharkhand State. The GP office was 7–10 km. from the Block Office. Mahurapur GP consisted of 15 villages out of which 8 were listed as backward villages. It had a total population of 24,148, out of which 12,436 are male and 11,712 are female. It had a SC population of 8,407 and ST population of 4358. The number of children of 0–6 years is 4361, out of which 2,224 were male and 2,137 female.

Being an agricultural area, rice was the main crop cultivated here. Some amount of wheat and mustard were also grown. Irrigation facility was not available. Land was cultivated only once. People of this GP were mainly agricultural labourers. They also worked in 'khadans' (stone quarries). Villagers generally migrated in the months of February and July to the Bardhaman district. In the MGNREGS out of 47 beneficiaries, out of which 12 were from backward villages and 35 are from non-backward villages.

Mahurapur GP had 39 km roads, out of which 28 km were semi-pucca roads, and 6 km was kuccha road. There were no villages with full electrification. Number of villages with partial electrification was 25 and out of 8 backward villages, 5 backward villages had partial electricity.

There were 125 deep tube wells, out of which 77 are in non-backward villages and 48 were in backward villages. But only 4 per cent of the villagers had toilet facility. There were only two villages with telephone facility. Out of eight backward villages only one had telephone facility.

Our Focus Group Discussion with the Panchayat members and functionaries revealed the following issues:

- Irrigation: There was no irrigation facility available in this GP.
- Communication: Majority of roads were semi-pucca or kuccha roads and there was no pucca road in this GP. Thus there was grave communication problem. Internal communication was also under developed and no rickshaw or van is available.
- Employment: There are no factories and industries. The people of this GP depended upon agriculture which in turn mainly depended upon rain. The other option was to work in a stone quarry which in the long run is injurious to their health.
- Illiteracy: It was another major problem in this GP, including the backward villages. It lead to lack of confidence resulting in the inability to express their demands. It also bred a 'culture of silence'.
- Health facilities: Health facilities were not adequate. The most frequent disease in this GP was *kalajar*. There was no primary health centre in this GP and there were only four health sub-centres.

All eight backward villages were inhabited by STs. The GP officials, who were non-ST, thought that the 'inherent characteristics' of the tribals were responsible for their backwardness. This reflects the mindset of at least some people engaged in the process of development.

From the GP office we next visited a village named Mukudapur. Mukandpur Mouza includes Simulguri village which had two parts - *Ucchu Para* (upper hamlet) and *Nichu Para* (lower hamlet). It had a population of 460, out of which 239 were male and 221 were female. This village was mainly inhabited by STs (Santhals) for years.

The following problems were identified in the village:

- Roads were unmetalled *kuccha* roads.
- There was no electricity in the village, though two electric posts and some wires were found. It was pointed out that wires were stolen by some villagers.
- Drinking water was scarce; only one tube well was found to be working.
- Health facility was very poor, as there was neither any Primary Health Centre nor any Health Sub Centre. There was no quack or trained doctor.
- Lack of awareness was another major problem of the villagers of this Mouza. The villagers hardly had any knowledge of various government schemes.
- Lack of political accountability was another notable feature of this GP. The representatives of the people did not frequent the areas under their jurisdiction.
- Addiction to alcoholic products like 'mohua' and 'hariya' was major problem of the villagers of this GP.
- The villagers were dependent on moneylenders for credit.

What was most striking about the villagers was their total cynicism regarding the development role of the Gram Panchayat. Migration was widespread. MGNREGS was yet to gather momentum. We saw that MGNREGS related excavation of pond had been stopped in the village because of some unknown reason. When we asked a householder whether he got some work from MGNREGS, he replied rather sarcastically, 'Oi du-tin din peyechi' (Yes, for two–three days).

A Backward Para within a Developed Village

Chakuparsol village is situated in Belsulia GP of Bishnupur Block in Purulia. It is a large village consisting of 18 *para*s, mostly inhabited by Muslims. The Village had striking signs of prosperity—two–three storied houses, a number of shops, extensive vegetable cultivation (which is expensive) etc. There were three primary schools, three ICDS centres and the main road was a well-constructed moram road. Double cropping, namely – *Aman* (monsoon paddy) and *Boro* (winter paddy) were widely practiced. There were 18- 20 SHGs in the village. The only missing element of development was proper health facility.

The *Sachib* (Secretary) of the Gram Unnayan Samity had a dominating presence in the discussion. The Sachib, an elderly Muslim with long beard, lived in a two storied house. We had to exercise considerable effort to ensure that the other villagers would take part in the discussion. It came out from discussion that there was one *para* where primarily STs lived. That *para* was at one end of the village. None of the villagers present were ready to accompany us in our visit to the *para*.

On reaching the *para* we found the usual visual image of a backward village. The houses were dilapidated with old tiles on the roof. The *para* was mostly inhabited by STs but it also had two Brahmin families. The inhabitants told us a story that is very different from the story that we heard in the developed part of the village. The Sachib had told us that there was no moneylender in the village. What we found was that the villagers of the poor *para* take loan from moneylenders of the developed *para*s of that village. They also work as labourers of the prosperous villagers.

Information Gap Regarding Anti-poverty Schemes

One of our hypotheses for the study was that the people living in the backward villages were not aware of the various anti-poverty schemes that the Government had introduced over the last decade or so. Some of them who were aware of the schemes do not know enough to take advantage of them or to collectively fight for their rights. In our questionnaire we chose to test how far the respondents were familiar with the names of certain common schemes and also whether they

believed that they knew who can be the beneficiaries of the schemes. The result of the survey has been provided in TABLEs below.

TABLE 5.19

Familiarity with AAY

District	Yes	No
Bankura	69.13	30.87
Birbhum	34.88	65.12
D. Dinajpur	58.39	41.61
Murshidabad	43.13	56.87
P. Medinipur	43.16	56.84
Purulia	26.09	73.91
U. Dinajpur	18.21	81.79
All respondents	**43.14**	**56.85**

Source: BVWB, p. 143.

TABLE 5.19.1

Familiarity with Eligibility Criteria of AAY

District	Yes	No
Bankura	49.09	50.91
Birbhum	55.75	44.25
D. Dinajpur	58.68	41.32
Murshidabad	64.46	35.54
P. Medinipur	69.20	30.80
Purulia	66.09	33.91
U. Dinajpur	56.92	43.08
All respondents	**59.17**	**40.82**

Source: BVWB, p. 144.

It can thus be seen that there was a vast degree of difference among the districts regarding their awareness level related to Annapurna and Antyodyaya Yojana. In Bankura and Dakshin Dinajpur more than 50 per cent of the respondents were familiar

with the schemes but in all other districts the percentage was less than 50 per cent. It was quite alarmingly low in Purulia (26.09 per cent) and Uttar Dinajpur (18.21 per cent). The awareness level of the respondents dropped below 50 per cent in case of the second question – the eligibility criteria. Once again Purulia and Uttar Dinajpur had shown the worst results, with Birbhum also in the less than 20 per cent category.

TABLE 5.20

Whether Heard of NOAPS— The Old Age Pension Scheme

District	Yes	No
Bankura	46.09	53.91
Birbhum	38.89	61.11
D. Dinajpur	75.52	24.48
Murshidabad	36.58	63.42
P.Medinipur	44.51	55.49
Purulia	23.09	76.91
U.Dinajpur	31.93	68.07
All respondents	**59.17**	**40.82**

Source: BVWB, p.144.

TABLE 5.20.1

Whether Familiar with the Eligibility Criteria of NOAPS

District	Yes	No
Bankura	59.70	40.30
Birbhum	77.78	22.22
D. Dinajpur	56.48	43.52
Murshidabad	66.47	33.53
P.Medinipur	68.83	31.17
Purulia	83.77	16.23
U.Dinajpur	60.53	39.47
All respondents	**66.18**	**33.16**

Source: BVWB, p. 145.

In the case of NOAPS the awareness level of Dakshin Dinajpur was quite high (75 per cent). The situation was quite dismal

elsewhere, with Purulia and Uttar Dinajpur once again showing the worst level of knowledge. In case of the second question the percentage dropped significantly but Purulia and Uttar Dinajpur were the worst performers.

TABLE 5.21

Whether Heard of IAY

District	Yes	No
Bankura	68.02	31.98
Birbhum	54.32	45.68
D. Dinajpur	82.87	17.13
Murshidabad	53.70	46.30
P.Medinipur	69.75	30.25
Purulia	47.23	52.77
U.Dinajpur	78.99	21.01
All respondents	**62.04**	**37.95**

Source: BVWB, p. 143.

TABLE 5.21.1

Whether Familiar with the Eligibility Criteria of IAY

District	Yes	No
Bankura	60.16	39.84
Birbhum	73.30	26.70
D. Dinajpur	57.38	42.62
Murshidabad	60.63	39.37
P.Medinipur	43.92	56.08
Purulia	88.89	11.11
U.Dinajpur	52.13	47.87
All respondents	**61.34**	**38.65**

Source: BVWB, p. 146.

It can be seen that the awareness level regarding IAY was clearly quite high with all but one district scoring more than 50 per cent. Unlike the previous two cases, Uttar Dinajpur has shown a very high level of awareness regarding this scheme. Purulia lagged behind.

Our field visits corroborated the findings that had been generated by the survey. Indira Awas Yojana is a popular scheme but we received complains of corruption. In one FGD in Murshidabad the villagers pointed out that the beneficiary got Rs 20,000 instead of Rs 25,000 and the remaining Rs 5,000 went to someone else as bribe. On the other hand, one Pradhan in Uttar Dinajpur told us that the government should stop IAY as only few of the beneficiaries came under its fold while the demand is huge. This, according to him, lead to misunderstanding and discontent.

TABLE 5.22

Whether Familiar with PROFLAL

District	Yes	No
Bankura	8.10	91.90
Birbhum	12.04	87.96
D. Dinajpur	6.64	93.36
Murshidabad	8.99	91.01
P.Medinipur	20.62	79.38
Purulia	1.50	98.50
U.Dinajpur	3.64	96.36
All respondents	**8.67**	**91.32**

Source: BVWB, p. 147.

TABLE 5.22.1

Whether Familiar with the Eligibility Criteria of PROFLAL

District	Yes	No
Bankura	36.21	63.79
Birbhum	69.23	30.77
D. Dinajpur	36.84	63.16
Murshidabad	47.06	52.94
P.Medinipur	24.30	75.70
Purulia	50.00	50.00
U.Dinajpur	38.46	61.54
All respondents	**39.57**	**60.42**

Source: BVWB, p. 147.

The result indicates that very few people knew about PROFLAL. Only Paschim Medinipur recorded a score of more than 20 per cent. Our field visits corroborated the findings from the survey. In all the districts that we visited PROFLAL was almost unknown. The relatively higher percentage in case of Paschim Medinipur was because of high awareness level in Sankrail (63.64), Garbeta III (40.00), Chandrakona II (50.00) and Binpur II (54.55). Binpur is located near Kharagpur and hence the awareness level in the region is high. The remaining Blocks are in the relatively more prosperous areas adjoining Hooghly district.

TABLE 5.23

Whether any Member of the Family has Received Job Card for MGNREGS

District	Yes	No
Bankura	77.79	22.21
Birbhum	89.51	10.49
D. Dinajpur	82.52	17.48
Murshidabad	60.68	39.32
P.Medinipur	74.57	25.43
Purulia	77.21	22.79
U.Dinajpur	84.31	15.69
All respondents	**74.96**	**25.03**

Source: BVWB, p. 148.

Unlike PROFLAL, the survey found a very high degree of awareness about MGNREGS. The performance was the worst in Murshidabad while Birbhum did the best. However it can be seen that there was a huge gap between those who have received job card and those who have actually got work.

Our field visits have shown that MGNREGS was extremely popular everywhere but the villagers were not generally aware that they need to apply for job card and getting a job is their right. The Gram Panchayats were also not very keen on letting people know that they have to ask for jobs as it would involve lot of paper work. Moreover some villagers complained that they need money on a daily basis whereas under the MGNREGS they got money after a

week. One Block Development Officer in Purulia told us that the villagers want money on a daily basis because they want to consume

TABLE 5.24

Whether Anyone has Got Work

District	Yes	No
Bankura	25.70	74.30
Birbhum	74.07	25.93
D. Dinajpur	56.64	43.36
Murshidabad	24.84	75.16
P.Medinipur	31.41	68.59
Purulia	39.73	60.27
U.Dinajpur	55.74	44.26
All respondents	**50**	**50**

Source: BVWB, p. 148.

liquor. Another BDO told us that the MGNREGS was biased towards those who can dig soil and hence it did not attract many who prefer to migrate rather than doing such work.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE STUDY

Once the field survey and the qualitative research was completed there were a series of discussions as to what could be the actions taken by the Government of West Bengal regarding the improvement of the backward villages. The team recommended that the Chief Secretary should head a task force and coordinate the activities of various departments so that concerted action is taken. It was felt that certain routine measures can vastly improve implementation such as filling up of all vacant posts in the GPs and the Block offices. In keeping with the planning methodology initiated by SRD more inclusive bottom-up planning should be initiated so that the villagers get an opportunity to air their views in the planning meetings and the government comes to know what the demand of the people are. It was also recommended that an extensive awareness generation campaign was required to disseminate information on various

facilities available for the poor people of the villages. Various measures were also recommended that would improve food security of the poor people of the villagers – strict implementation of state and centrally sponsored schemes on food security should be a priority. It was felt it is possible to encourage the villagers to adopt low-cost technology of sustainable agriculture and develop kitchen gardens so that their reliance on the market could be reduced. Cottage and small scale industries in the districts also need to be given a priority so that more non-farm jobs are created. The Government was encouraged to look closely at the problems of irrigation and find a solution. Specific steps were recommended for improvement of credit facility such as increase in the number of SHGs, opening of more rural bank outlets, etc. Finally steps were recommended for the improvement of educational and health facilities and reduction of the information gap of the villagers.

Conclusion: Hunger and Democracy

The report on the backward villages was submitted to the Government of West Bengal in 2008. After approval by the Department, it was decided that all the eight studies would be published. Thus the file was prepared to get the consent of the Minister-in-Charge. After a few days the file came back with the Minister's approval. It seemed that the studies, most of which were critical of the present panchayat system, would actually be made public now that the Minister's approval has been given.

Then something mysterious happened. The 2009 Lok Sabha election was approaching and I found that the Research file has gone to the cold storage. There was never any official instruction to stop the publication of the studies. However I found that the department has gone slow on this issue. Copies of the backward village report were kept locked inside one of the steel *almirah*s (cupboards) of the SRD cell. I realised that my supervisor, the Project Director of SRD, has received some instruction from somewhere to keep them hidden. I was encouraged to work on other issues.

After the electoral defeat of Left Front in 2011, six studies conducted by the State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development were published by a Delhi based publisher in two volumes.[10] The report on the backward villages was not made public even by the new regime after coming to power. The development of the backward villages was also put in the back burner. The list of backward villages still exists and the 4612 villages are still part of the list. The issue however is no more a 'hot' one. The backward villages of West Bengal lost their significance in the heap of files aimed at development of the state.

On 8 January 2014, *The Indian Express* carried a news item titled, 'Mamata Visits Amlashol, first by a CM in 10 years'. The report says that she laid the foundation stone for a road that will connect the village to a 16000 km road network being planned for the state. She also handed over land deeds to tribals of the Lodha community. The report went on to say that Amlashol was now been promoted by the state government as a 'model village' where pitch roads, eight tube wells, one pump, a ration outlet and at least 25 concrete house have come up. The village also has been blessed with electricity although the nearby villages still lack the facility. According to the report, for the two months before the visit of the Chief Minister, various departments worked on a war footing to improve the condition of the village. However even though the village has seen lot of development since the new government came to power, the villagers were yet to get a secure source of livelihood. The reporter interviewed a young woman of twenty-two, Malati Sabar and her sister Sambari Sarkar, who were still suffering from malnutrition. The reporter said that although Malati was only 22, she looked 50 years old. Malati said that she somehow manages to find two meals in a day. Government has helped her to build a house she said as she stood in the queue for getting seed packets from the Chief Minister. She said that she is getting rice at Rs 2 per kg per week but said that she does not have any source of livelihood. A sixty-year-old Lakshman Murrah told the reporter, 'The Government has given us many things. But we want permanent employment here.'[11] According to another report published in *The Telegraph*, the people of the village demanded a Madhyamik school, a proper health centre, training for livelihood and government support to promote tourism in the area.[12] According to *The Economic Times*, Mamata Banerjee asked the Block Development Officers and Additional District Magistrate of Paschim Medinipur to conduct a survey of Amlashol and its adjoining area and submit

the report.[13]

The story of Amlashol and more generally that of the backward villages that I have narrated in this chapter is neither one of complete neglect on part of the Government (Left and TMC) nor one of systematic long term development of backward villages. Rather it points towards a crucial malaise within the development administration – ad hocism. Under certain circumstances, especially if there is a certain amount of media pressure, some issues become 'hot' and the bureaucracy is geared up to address them. This is usually followed by a series of quick-fix measures aimed at pleasing the superiors. However media attention as well as administrative attention does not remain for long and the development activities fails to improve the condition of the poor villages in the long run. While I agree with Amartya Sen that democracy and free media helps in preventing hunger,[14] we need to also take note of certain complexities in the functioning of media and democratic system which allows hunger or near-hunger to continue. The study on the backward villages for example was suppressed because of the contingencies of democratic politics. Similarly the report by Indian Express quoted above clearly shows that the villages around Amlashol were not as fortunate in terms of receiving benefits like electricity. While certain welfare measures were certainly taken in Amlashol and elsewhere this did not solve the problem of livelihood of the poor which requires long term and sustained effort over a period of time that the administration of a democratically elected government seems to be incapable of providing. It is also clear from both the story of Amlashol in particular and the story of the backward villages in general that local democracy in this case failed to have the transformative impact that is expected of them. Thus democracy and free press is not sufficient to transform poor villages. Endemic poverty in the poor villages can co-exist with democracy and free press.

Notes and References

[1] *Anadabazar Patrika*, 10 June 2004.

[2] *The Telegraph*, 1 July 2004.

[3] Dilip Ghosh, Prabhat Datta, Ajay Bhattacharya, Dipankar Sinha, and Debraj Bhattacharya, *The Backward Villages of West Bengal: An Exploratory Study*, Report submitted to Government of West Bengal, Unpublished, 2008. The author acknowledges the research assistance of Mr. Anirban Seth and Ms Payel Sen during the survey and report writing phase of the study.

[4] The exact amount of land which comes under the term 'bigha' varies but the general average for the state is 3 bighas = 1 acre. Although the precise measure of bigha varies from district to district it does not vary so widely that it would alter the argument that we have derived from the table.

[5] MGNREGS – Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

[6] PROFLAL – Provident Fund for Landless Agricultural Labourers.

[7] NOAPS – National Old Age Pension Scheme

[8] IAY – Indira Awas Yojana

[9] AAY – Antodaya Anna Yojana

[10] Alok Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Satyabrata Chakraborty, Apurba Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Gram Panchayats in West Bengal: Institutional Capabilities and Developmental Interventions*, vols 1 and 2, Mittal, New Delhi, 2012.

[11] Madhuparna Das, 'Mamata visits Amlashol, first CM in 10 years' in *The Indian Express*, 8 January 2014.

[12] Arnab Ganguly, 'CM shuns Amlasole Dias', *The Telegraph*, 8 January, 2014.

[13] *The Economic Times*, 8 January, 2014.

[14] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

6

Fatakeshto and the Fantasy of Development

In this chapter I shall take a break from the analysis of the 'real' to discuss a popular icon of the 'reel', i.e. Bengali popular cinema. However I would argue towards the latter half of the chapter that the 'reel' has some significance for an analysis of the 'real' and indeed the distinction between the two can sometimes get blurred as we try to understand populist politics. However let me firstly clarify the theoretical concerns that have pushed me towards exploring Bengali popular cinema.

Partha Chatterjee has argued, largely based on an analysis of contemporary West Bengal, that the domain of politics in much of contemporary developing societies consists of a small civil society which is built along liberal principles and a large section that he has called the political society[1]. Democratic politics and developmental actions of the state that is played out here on a daily basis are only partly legal and do not follow the principles/ethical codes of a liberal civil society. There are constant negotiations between the state officials, the various population groups and political parties that seek their support and what we see in streets and squatters around us is a reflection of this negotiated existence. On a daily basis this is what popular politics is all about.

In a way therefore, as per Chatterjee's formulation, popular politics is played out in strictly rational terms between members of political society, state agencies and political parties. Whether it subscribes to the ethical codes of a liberal civil society or not is another matter. This is where I think we need to go beyond Chatterjee's formulation. We need to enter into the fuzzy area of

how the subaltern fantasizes about development and politics, how populist politics in turn creates popular icons that have magnetic power over masses, and how the political society connects emotionally with popular politics.

The second discomfort that has pushed me towards this chapter is the apparent disjuncture between what is understood as "development" in the professional "development sector" and what is understood to be "development" in the popular domain. Is it not true that the popular ideas of "development" is a combustible mixture of real and unreal aspirations, of hopes and dreams and fantasies whereas the professional understanding of development a cold statistical one? Do the two spheres understand development as the same thing or are these two distinct domains? If they are distinctly different then how do we, without an elaborate and expensive survey, understand what Chatterjee's political society perhaps would understand as development? And how do we relate popular politics with popular notions of development? These questions took me towards certain films of recent Bengali popular cinema which I discuss here.

Bengali Popular Cinema

The film industry in West Bengal, Tollywood in popular parlance, has followed a distinct narrative of its own since 1947.[2] Apart from great film makers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, the industry has also produced its share of popular middle-class cinema and its superstars/icons such as Uttam Kumar and Soumitra Chatterjee. While the debate as to who is greater among the two still continues in *adda* sessions, there is something in common to both of them – they represent, along with female icons such as Suchitra Sen, a middle-class *bhadralok* superstar. They are matinee idols of the *bhadralok* society of Bengal, Leftist or otherwise, and representative of a certain kind of educated and cultured form of male cinematic icons. One can fairly easily fit the two super stars within a distinctly Bengali *bhadralok* imagination of itself.

However there is a third icon who is somewhat difficult to fit in within the self-imagination of the *bhadralok*. He is an icon who transgresses the boundaries of the "ruchisheel" (tasteful) *bhadralok* society because of the nature of his films. Yet he is also an award

winning film actor who has succeeded in Bollywood (which neither Uttam Kumar nor Soumitra Chatterjee did) and also has successfully performed in Bengali "art" films as well films meant for the masses. He is Mithun Chakraborty, arguably the best actor in films that Bengal has produced, but who will never have the same iconic status as Uttam Kumar and Soumitra Chatterjee in Bengali *bhadralok* mind, for reasons that we shall discuss later. It is the iconisation of Mithun Chakraborty, or "Mithun-da", in two recent Bengali popular films that I wish to discuss here in order to explore certain facets of popular culture and popular politics in contemporary Bengal.

The Transgressive Icon

Why am I saying that Mithun Chakraborty's cinematic image as a star is transgressive? Let me walk down the memory lane for this. When I was a child living in a middle class neighbourhood of South Kolkata I came to know of a certain film called Disco Dancer[3], which was a super hit film and the songs played loudly in our neighbourhood Puja Pandals. It was a very rare situation indeed. It was probably the first time that a Bengali male actor had conquered the imagination of the country and had become a major star in Bombay film industry. After Disco Dancer Mithun Chakraborty was as big a star as Amitabh Bacchan, at least for that year. So as Bengalis we should have been proud. Many boys in the neighbourhood and the nearby slum area did actually start to imitate Mithun's style of dancing, his hair style and his clothes. However in spite of his success, Bengali *bhadralok* society was caught in two minds. My parents, for example, never went to see the film, nor did they ever encourage me to see the film. When the film was first released I was too young to go to a movie on my own but even later Disco Dancer was not really a film that was recommended to us for developing our cinematic/cultural taste. It was not considered appropriate for a member of a *bhadralok* society. Yet the fact that Mithun Chakraborty had become a star in Bollywood was admired by many as a great Bengali achievement. However this achievement was not quite like that of Satyajit Ray's film winning an award in an important film festival which was without doubt a great

bhadralok Bengali achievement. Mithun's achievement was registered in Bengali *bhadralok* society but was not quite given the cultural approval – as a cultural product, Disco Dancer was not acceptable as a part of the *bhadralok* society. The young boys of the neighbourhood loved the icon and tried to imitate his dancing steps but it was not what parents would tell their children to imitate. He was an icon all right, but the film smacked off "low culture", of "a-bhadrata", of absence of "ruchi" or taste. May be a Bengali had become an icon in Bollywood but the hit number "I am a Disco Dancer" did not get the cultural approval that Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen number "Ei poth Jodi na sesh hoy" had. There was something about "Disco" that was equivalent to "westernized degeneration", something "a-bhadra", something that the slum dwellers and the uncultured were supposed to admire and not the refined, educated bhadralok.

The Split

Let us carefully notice what had happened here. There was a paradox within the cultural world of Bengal. Bengal had just found its biggest cinematic icon. For the first time someone had become a leading icon in Bollywood and whose dancing steps were being imitated across the country, including the neighbourhood where I lived. Hair cutting saloons had posters of "Mithun" on the mirrors. But it was also not possible to give the particular film, or some of its clones in the immediate future, the status of a great Bengali cultural achievement. The masses loved it, including many *bhadralok* youth, but it was not possible to give it any *bhadralok* respectability. Thus the first truly mass icon of cinema emerged from Bengal and became dangerously popular. I say "dangerously" because it threatened to gain an autonomous domain of its own where the sanctity of cultural respectability was not actually necessary. It was also dangerous because it had a massive influence not just on the non-*bhadralok* section of the society but also on a substantial number of Bengali *bhadralok* youth.

Thus the phenomenon that was Disco Dancer in the mid-eighties represented a split within Bengal – a split between the respected world of cultural production and the popularity of an icon of "low culture". Roughly around this time Bengali politics also began to

feel the heat of this split and the very logic of democratic politics generated its own dynamics of tension between the respectable and the popular. The event that symptomised this tension, this split within Bengal, was a cultural event organized by CPI(M) leader Subhash Chakraborty called "Hope 86". This was a cultural event held in the newly built Salt Lake Stadium, apparently nothing more than a cultural event, but it seriously split the ruling CPI(M) party leaders on two sides. The patron of high culture and future Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, did not attend the event in protest. At the core of the controversy was the fact that this was the first time that the Left party, had endorsed popular low culture. Traditionally the Left was associated with a certain type of high culture, and even Utpal Dutt's "People's Little Theatre" was well within the boundaries of high culture in terms of its usage of language and theatrical innovations. So to be a Leftist did not simply mean to believe in Marx but perhaps even more importantly to be a Bengali who is a practitioner of good cultural taste. Yet by mid-eighties it was impossible to ignore the pressure of "low culture" which the majority of the voters engaged in. Not to give recognition to such a trend was considered by the likes of Subhash Chakraborty, politically disastrous, whereas the likes of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Jatin Chakrabarti felt that this represented a compromise with the ideals of a Bengali *bhadralok* Leftist.

Tollywood after Uttam Kumar

Six years before Hope 86 and two years before Disco Dancer, in 1980 Uttam Kumar passed away. With his death also came to an end the era of *bhadralok* cinema. This does not mean that *bhadralok* cinema, or at least cinema meant for the *bhadralok* middle-class were not produced any more, but that Tollywood cinema came to represent the split that I have mentioned above. From a unified cinema of middle-class *bhadralok* sensibilities of the Uttam-Suchitra-Soumtira- Madhabi era, Bengali cinema now developed three distinct types - the first that of the Bengali middle-class cinema aimed at the Bengali *bhadralok* sensibilities and the other the cinema for the popular mass sensibility – a distinction that has continued to this day. There was of course the third category, the "art films" of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Aparna Sen, Goutam Ghose and others

but they were seen by a small section of the *bhadralok* society, a sub-set of the first type of audience that I had mentioned earlier. Such films often required the patronage of the state and national governments rather than the market although their position in terms of cultural respectability was unquestionable.

Mass cinema, devoid of any state patronage, worked out its own market based model. This model borrowed elements from Bombay Film industry and the southern film industry but was different in one crucial way – the filmmakers had very little money to play with and typically a film had a budget of less than Rs 1 Crore (10 million), cared very little about technical finesse, and relied on a mix of sentimentality, romance and heroism to generate melodramas which relied heavily on punchy dialogues rather than high quality special effects or excellence in cinematography. Makers of mass cinema realized that their target audience was not the audience that went to see Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen films, but the newly emerging rural and semi-urban audience of post-land reform West Bengal. This was an audience that had not yet developed finer aesthetic sense of cinema. But in terms of content there was a big shift from the days of Uttam-Suchitra era of *bhadralok* cinema that was similar to mass cinema of Bollywood and South India – instead of the middle class *bhadralok* society the films started to depict another society. I would like to call this "another society" because it would be a mistake to say that instead of the *bhadralok* society Tollywood cinema started to show the society of the lower classes, rural or urban. This was actually done by the "art films" of Mrinal Sen and other "parallel cinema" practitioners in films like *Akaler Sondhaney*[4] or *Paar*[5] for example. The mass cinema makers instead created a partially real society in their films where elements from the real and the unreal where mixed to produce melodramatic moments of cinema. Thus the hero and the heroine would be perhaps dressed up in ways that would not be realistic and of course there would song sequences and fights that were not "real".

This "another society" was however distinctly different from the society that was depicted in the romantic films of Uttam Kumar or Soumitra Chatterjee. Thus a landmark film which set the tone of the years to come, *Troyee*[6], which also starred Mithun Chakraborty, completely changed the song picturisation of the earlier Uttam Kumar era. The song picturisation of the earlier era was firmly

confined to middle-class cultural norms. The Hero and Heroine would perhaps hold hands and stroll by the Ganges or the hero would play the piano or would sing in a recording studio and the heroine would listen from afar on the radio or at the most the hero would be riding a motorbike and the heroine would be behind him on the motorbike. *Troyee* brought in a paradigm shift in song picturisation in Bengali cinema in the song *"Jana Ojana Pothey Cholechi"* where the heroine, played by Debashree Roy not only wore "western clothes" but, more importantly, danced with the two men of her lives. Needless to say, this dancing was not the traditional classical Indian dance or the kind of dancing associated with Tagore's songs. She was seen dancing with both the men in her lives and riding on a strange kind of three-wheeler. The heroine did not do radical skin show but certainly made moves that showed more easiness with sexuality than the songs picturised in an earlier era by Suchitra Sen, Tanuja or Madhabi Mukherjee. This trend has continued over the years and if one examines the song picturisation of contemporary Bengali film icon Dev, one would see a clear continuation. Of course the dance moves have become better, cinematography and choreography much more sophisticated and the heroines are not afraid to show skin but the turning point was *"Jana Ojana"* of *Troyee*. *Troyee* also featured a Bollywood style "item number" by Bollywood's legendary item song dancer – Helen. Bengali mass cinema was thus clearly turning a new leaf and was beginning to cater to a whole new audience and whole new sensibility.

The continuity and change in Bengali mass cinema – continuity of certain sensibilities of the Uttam Kumar era and the new sensibility emerging from Troyee – are reflected in the career the most important Bengali film star of the post Uttam Kumar era prior to the arrival of Dev– Prasenjit Chatterjee. Prasenjit was popular for songs like *"Amar Sangi"*[7] which was picturised in the Uttam-Suchitra tradition but also made films like *Badnaam* which starred Bollywood heroine Neelam and had songs like: *Jhaal Legechey amar Jhaal Legechey/ Jhaley Morey Jai Ami Jhale Morey Jai/ Sondeshey Hobey na, Rabritey Hobey na/ Tomar Mishti Mukher Mishti Hashi Mishti Chowa Chai"*[8] where the heroine is seen getting drunk and trying to woo the hero Prasenjit in a manner that is clearly "a-bhadra" with heaving breasts and lyrics full of sexual innuendos.

While Prasenjit emerged as the leading hero from mid-eighties and through the nineties, Mithun Chakraborty, disappeared from Bengali cinema during this time. The most likely reason for this perhaps is that he did very well in Bollywood and Bengali cinema industry was not in a position to pay the kind of fees that he commanded as one of the top heros of Bollywood in the eighties and nineties. He did act in one or two films but was not present as a leading hero since *Anyay Abichar*[9] in 1985. His most important contribution after 1985 in fact came as an actor in an art house film *"Tahader Katha"*[10] by Buddhadeb Dasgupta for which he won the National Award in 1992 in the category of "Best Actor".

The *bhadralok* society that I belonged to, saw the new trends in Bengali cinema through the lens of "decline", a refrain that continues even today. Such cinema was considered an embarrassment after the "glorious years" of Bengali cinema when Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar dressed in "sober" middle-class clothes portraying middle-class characters sung songs like "Ei poth Jodi na Sesh Hoy". However a new audience had emerged post-land reform and the rural transformation of the eighties who now came to constitute a new, and perhaps the most important, market of Bengali cinema.

The Angry Middle-Aged Man

Mithun Chakraborty re-appeared in Bengali cinema in a big way from 2002 onwards. His reappearance was in fact in another art house film – *Titli*[11] by Rituparno Ghosh. But he soon began to star in a series of films for the masses which curved out a distinct identity within the Bengali cinema. By this time Prasenjit was moving away from mass cinema to middle-class cinema and the new icon of Bengali cinema was Dev who was known for his dancing skills more than anything else. He was the new romantic hero with good looks and a muscular body and dancing ability that can match anyone in India. While some of his films did have an "angry young man" component, such as *"Challenge"*[12] he was known primarily for his young-romantic image. Mithun Chakraborty, although once a pioneer of dancing, now curved out for himself a different kind of image, something that one may describe as the "angry middle-aged man". No more a romantic hero, no more a dancing sensation, Mithun Chakraborty now became the angry loner addressing issues

of popular discontent.

Before proceeding towards a detailed discussion of two of his films let me provide a filmography of Mithun Chakraborty's Bengali films between 2002 and 2012[13]. The list is as follows:

Year	Film
2002	Titli, Bangali Babu, Ferari Fauj
2003	Guru, Santrash, Raasta
2004	Barood, Coolie
2005	Devdoot, Arjun Rickshawala, Chita, Chore Chore Mastuto bhai, Shaktiman, Dada, Yudyo
2006	Golapi Ekhon Bilatey, Hungama, MLA Fatakeshto, Mahasangram
2007	Tulkalam, Minister Fatakeshto, Tiger, Mahaguru
2008	Satyameba Jayate, Kaalpurush
2010	Rehmat Ali, Haanda aar Bhonda, Shukno Lanka, Target the Final Mission, Golapi Ekhon Bilatey
2011	Ami Subhash Bolchi
2012	Nobel Chor, Le Halwa Le

Out of these films *Titli* and *Kaalpurush*[14] may be regarded as 'art house' or 'auteur' films directed by Rituparno Ghosh and Buddhadeb Dasgupta respectively while *Nobel Chor*[15] and *Shukno Lanka*[16] may be classified as Bengali middle-class cinema. I have not included another art house film, *"Ek Nadir Galpo"*[17] directed by Samir Chanda which was not commercially released. This film was made in 2008 and was shown in various film festivals.

The rest of the films are all films meant for the masses. For the purpose of our analysis of popular concept of development/politics I shall discuss two of these films – MLA Fatakeshto and Minister Fatakeshto. Both films are indisputable commercial successes and "Fatakeshto" has become a contemporary popular icon of sorts.

Fatakeshto as a Popular Icon

MLA Fatakeshto[18] opens with Home Minister Ranadeb Bose, whose political affiliation is not clearly stated, sitting in his office when an assistant of his brings him a CD. He says to the Minister that this

CD has been delivered to him from an unknown source. The Minister asks him to play the CD. The CD is played and it is found that someone has recorded Minister's weekend escapade with a sex worker. Both the Minister and the assistant are stunned by the CD. As they watch the CD the phone rings. The Leader of the Opposition informs Bose that the CD will be played in every television news channel in the evening and Bose should be prepared for it. Home Minister is stunned but then tells his assistant to call Fatakeshto.

Fatakeshto makes a dramatic entry in to the screen with the signature tune "Fatakeshto, Fatakeshto, Fatakeshto" echoing in the background. He smashes the guards of the opposition leader's palatial house as he enters. The guards are hardly able to put up a resistance and each punch or kick of Fatakeshto throws them a few feet away. Fatakeshto meets the opposition leader, threatens him, and takes the CD and leaves. Next, we see the Home Minister, very happy with Fatakeshto and says that the reason why he likes him so much is that Fatakeshto never says "no" to him. Fatakeshto however counters him and says that he has a long list of "no" which he will hand over some day to the Minister.

Fatakeshto returns home. Here we find him in a middle class setting with a wife and a son. His wife, dressed in Sari, is angry that Fatakeshto is late and Fatakeshto appears to be afraid of his wife and a song-and-dance sequence follows in which Fatakeshto accepts that his wife is the boss of the household – she is the "hero" while Fatakeshto is "zero" at home. The sequence establishes Fatakeshto as a loving father and a devoted husband within a middle-class society although he is by profession a goonda.

The happy song-and-dance sequence fades into a scene where a real estate businessman, a "promoter" in local parlance, has arrived in a slum with the intention of destroying it in order to raise a multi-storied skyscraper for the well-to-do. Fatakeshto makes a heroic appearance in the scene accompanied by the signature tune of "Fatakeshto Fatakeshto Fatakeshto" and confronts the promoter. He says to the promoter pointing his fingers at him – "Maarbo Ekhane Laash Porbe Shawshaney" which literally means "I shall kill you here but your dead body will not fall here but straight in the crematorium" but the literal translation cannot deliver the verbal effect of the Bengali sentence. This is Fatakeshto's catchline, repeated again and again at crucial junctures. It is a form of verbal violence

which is aimed at displaying Fatakeshto's extraordinary powers and hence the exaggerated statement that the body shall fall far away in the crematorium. The promoter says in return that he has court order with him for the eviction of the slums but Fatakeshto defiantly replies that in this slum only Fatakeshto's order prevails and adds – "the slum is not a packet of sweets that you can just buy and take home." This is followed by a fight in which of course Fatakeshto is the clear winner. A police officer, who is an ally of the promoter, arrives in the scene with his troops and threatens Fatakeshto but Fatakeshto tells him to get lost.

Following this incident of defiance the promoter goes to the corrupt Home Minister, Mr Ranadeb Bose. Bose tries to bribe Fatakeshto but Fatakeshto refuses him. The Minister therefore plans a trick which he indicates to the promoter will be played out during the Diwali festivals.

As the local people including Fatakeshto and his wife and son are celebrating the Diwali festivals with a song and a dance a fire breaks out in the slum. Fatakeshto's son is critically injured although he manages to save him. Meanwhile the fire in the slum becomes headline news in electronic media and a young female reporter named Chaitali Ray, played by Koel Mallick, takes a leading role in this. Sensing the public mood Ranadeb Bose, the corrupt Home Minister, visits the slum. Chaitali Ray interviews him and he says to the camera as well as to the people around him that he is very sad that something like this has happened but the people of the slum would soon be shifted to a nice apartment complex. At this point Fatakeshto appears and accuses the Minister on live TV that the Minister is responsible for the fire. The Minister in return ridicules Fatakeshto and says he is just a goonda who plays cheap tricks to get in the news. The work of a Home Minister is much more difficult and complicated. He then challenges Fatakeshto to become the Home Minister for seven days to show his worth. Supported by the people around him, Fatakeshto decides to accept the challenge.

The following few days Chaitali Ray, the television reporter, runs an opinion poll on TV to judge whether the people of the state would like to see Fatakeshto as the Home Minister for seven days. Different sections of the society are interviewed and they all agree that Fatakeshto should become the Home Minister. One lady says,

"Given the disaster we are in it will not get worse in the next seven days." A young man who earns his living by selling film tickets in the black market ("blacker") says, "Guru [Fatakeshto] is our man, this film is a hit!" Another poor man says "I have seen the real face of good people, why don't we have a bad person for seven days?" The channel that Chaitali Ray works for carries out an opinion poll which shows that 85% of the people want Fatakeshto as the Home Minister. Seeing this, the Home Minister Ranadeb Bose tries to threaten the TV channel but the young reporter is unfazed. The Police Officer whom Fatakeshto had earlier beaten up in the slum arrests Fatakeshto and beats him up in the lock-up but once again Chaitali Ray helps Fatakeshto to get bail and get out of the police custody. We come to know that Chaitali Ray's father was killed by Ranadeb Bose and therefore she has a special reason for helping Fatakeshto. She tells Fatakeshto that she is very much with him and the Chief Minister is also with Fatakeshto.

At this stage the Chief Minister, played by Soumitra Chatterjee, makes his appearance. He is a *bhadralok* clad in white dhoti and kurta and speaks chaste Bengali. He tells his cabinet that since the public opinion in favour of Fatakeshto is so strong he would like to appoint Fatakeshto as the Home Minister for seven days. It is interesting to note that the film shows lot of popular discontent against the government but does not show the Chief Minister in a negative light. Rather he appears to be a good person who has quite a few bad ministers in his cabinet who are the target of people's anger.

Before Fatakeshto takes charge as the Home Minister he meets the Chief Minister. He discloses that he was once a very bright student of him when the Chief Minister was a teacher and his real name is Krishnasarathi (Krishna the charioteer). How he then became a goonda and how his name became Fatakeshto is not disclosed but the Chief Minister blesses him and says, "Over the next seven days you will have to fight a 'dharmayudhya'. In this battle you shall be Krishna the charioteer and you shall be Arjuna as well."

This classical moment where the Chief Minister borrowed an analogy from the Mahabharata is quickly replaced by a popular song-and-dance sequence where Fatakeshto bursts into a song with many other accompanying him:

Ami MLA Fatakeshto, Ami MLA Fatakeshto
Chiney rakho bhalo kore ami desher neta
Syanakey banai gadha sob kalokey sada
Ghush niley taar chakri jabe eve-teasing e phasi hobe
Kalo taka kalo bajar korbo ebar noshto
Ami MLA Fatakeshto, Ami MLA Fatakeshto.
Chor pulishey phondi kore chalay rabon raj
Chokh bondho tai to ondhwo deshey ain aaj
Hashpataley rogi morey daktarera bilet ghorey
Smoshaney to moreo koshto
Soytani korbo noshto
Ami MLA Fatakeshto
Bibek bhogey, swarthwo agey - etai ekhon niti
Ghor koli, lekha poray dhukchey raajneeti
Swoshur bari pon niyey bouke poray agun diyey
Poshur odhom hoyechey jara ami debo tader koshto
Ami MLA Fatakeshto, Ami MLA Fatakeshto

It will be facile to try and do a literal translation of the lyrics, but let me explain what the song means. It is a song in which Fatakeshto is explaining his agenda as a Member of the Legislative Assembly or MLA. He declares that everybody should keep in mind that he is now the MLA and the *neta* (leader). He transforms the clever [in a negative sense] into a donkey, i.e. a fool. Anybody who will take bribe will lose his job. Eve-teasers i.e. those who harass women sexually, will be hanged. He will destroy black money and black income. The criminals and the police have created a nexus that has created a land of Ravana, referring to the mythological character of Ramayana. All eyes are closed and therefore rule of law does not exist. In hospitals patients are dying while doctors are going for their foreign trips. Conscience of the people does not exist anymore and only self-interest prevails. In this Kaliyuga politics (used in a negative sense) has entered education. In-laws are burning young girls after taking dowry. Fatakeshto shall hurt those who have become worse than animals.

Before Fatakeshto starts his life as MLA there is a short scene

which deserves our attention. His wife gives him a new set of clothes which is in white. Fatakeshto initially refuses to take them saying that he is after all a goonda and therefore why should he change his sartorial style. But ultimately he relents and accepts the white clothes. Thus the goonda gets transformed into a respectable MLA. His wife now becomes the MLA's wife rather than a goonda's wife.

With the blessing of the Chief Minister, Fatakeshto's journey as Home Minister begins. He has seven days to clean up the system and transform society.

On the first day Fatakeshto calls a meeting with his officers which includes some police officers as well. He makes it clear to all the officers that they must get along with their work at a brisk pace and all files must be attended to as early as possible. The officers are taken aback by his aggressive and unconventional style of instruction. One of them quips, "is he a goonda?". Fatakeshto immediate retorts, "yes I am a goonda, I have just changed my clothes for seven days." Thus Fatakeshto made it clear to his officers that he is not going to follow the niceties of a genteel society and would come down hard on the erring officers.

Next, we find a group of hoodlums posing as student union leaders preventing some students from appearing in an exam. The lady reporter, Chaitali Ray calls Fatakeshto from the spot. Fatakeshto comes and smashes up the union leaders and thunders at them his catch line, "Maarbo ekhaney laash porbe swoshaney" [will smash you up here but your dead body shall fall in the crematorium.] Clearly having become a Minsiter, Fatakehsto was not willing to change his style of functioning. This proves very effective and the hoodlums/union leaders disappear from the scene and the good students are able to sit for their examination.

Fatakeshto's third stop for the day is a public distribution shop, popularly called a ration shop. This is a store from which poor people are supposed to get subsidized goods like rice, oil, etc but are often deprived of such subsidies because of corruption. Fatakeshto finds out that the beneficiaries are not getting goods from the ration shop for last three weeks. He then asks the proprietor of the shop ["ration dealer" in popular parlance] where his storehouse ("godown") is. A visit to the storehouse reveals that a lot of material has been illegally stored there to be sold in the black market. When threatened by Fatakeshto, the proprietor of the ration

shop explained that this is standard practice and he has to pay bribes to lot of people including the Food Minister. Fatakeshto delivers him justice by beating him up and orders that from now on the common people must get their due from the ration shop. Thus concludes the first of the seven days.

On the second day we find Fatakeshto in his official car heading towards a district. On the way a poor woman stops him on the road by begging and crying in front of the car. Fatakeshto gets out of the car and the woman tells him that her husband has died but the Hospital is not willing to release the dead body because she has not as yet cleared the Rs 200,000 that is due them. Fatakeshto orders his Secretary to pay her Rs 200,000. Following this Fatakeshto disguises himself as a poor man and goes to the hospital with the dead body saying that his father is critically ill and something needs to be done urgently. The doctors see this as another opportunity to make money although they realize in the Operation Theatre that the person is dead. They decide to have a fake operation and asked Fatakeshto to pay a large sum of money so that his father could be operated upon. Fatakeshto then reveals himself and gives the doctors a taste of his own brand of violent medicine.

At the beginning of the third day we find Fatakeshto giving loans to the unemployed youth for the purpose of setting up their own business. He also attacks country liquor shops. In the evening he meets an old man who was planning to commit suicide. Fatakeshto saves him and finds out that he is an old freedom fighter who has to bribe various officials in order to get his pension. Fatakeshto promises him to address the issue the next day.

The fourth day begins with the old man repeating the usual exercise of trying to push his different layers of the bureaucracy, paying the bribe and then also carrying the file to the next level. When he reaches the senior most official he asks for a bribe of Rs 1000/-. At this point Fatakeshto enters and threatens to beat him up. He warns him that if he ever tries to take bribe again then he would be badly beaten up next time. The old man is very pleased that his problem has been solved and says that Fatakeshto reminds him of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

In the next episode we find a young man lying dead on the street. A motley crowd is gathered around him. One of them explains to the lady reporter Chaitali Ray that this man tried to stop a woman

from getting raped and therefore was murdered by people of the "party". The police arrives to take away the body and also to wash away the evidence of the murder. Seeing this, Chaitali Ray protests. When the police refuse to answer any question from her she calls the Home Minister Fatakeshto. In no time Fatakeshto arrives and says that there have been eleven murders in the locality but the police have not taken any action. The police officer explains to Fatakeshto that the officer before him had caught a notorious criminal named Shiba but he was released very soon as he had political connections. Then the officer got murdered. In reply Fatakeshto points towards the revolver on the side of the waist of the police officer and advices that this must be used for the purpose of killing such criminals. The police therefore feel emboldened and aggressively kill several criminals, which earns Fatakeshto's approval.

Seeing the brilliant performance of Fatakeshto in the first four days Ranadeb Bose, the former Home Minister, decides that it is time to damage Fatakeshto's reputation. As per the plan a fight breaks out in a slum. Fatakeshto arrives and gives the goondas five minutes to get into their homes. Fierce fighting follows. One of the hoodlums against whom Fatakeshto fought is later found to be murdered in police custody. Ranadeb Bose propagated that this has happened because of Fatakeshto and he is responsible for the murder. He approaches the Chief Minister and demands the resignation of Fatakeshto. The Chief Minister is convinced by the argument and he asks Fatakeshto to resign. However just in time Fatakeshto manages to find out that that the doctor who gave the death certificate on the basis of which he was held guilty was actually bribed and threatened by Ranadeb Bose. Fatakeshto in turn threatens him and makes him confess the truth. He finds the police officer who on behalf of Ranadeb Bose killed the goonda, beats him up and drags him to Ranadeb Bose's house. He has a war of words with Ranadeb Bose where he points out that he has managed to raise the consciousness of the people and henceforth whoever becomes the Home Minister he will have to work according to the wishes of the people. The Chief Minister also realizes his mistake and apologises to him.

Ranadeb Bose however continued with his game plan. Firstly he killed Fatakeshto's wife by planting a bomb in his house which

went off when Fatakeshto called his wife and his wife picked up the receiver. Then he and the opposition leader joined hands to plan an assassination of the Chief Minister and put the blame on Fatakeshto. However although Chief Minister was shot while traveling, Fatakeshto managed to save him. The final confrontation takes in a slum where Ranadeb Bose is badly beaten up and the Chief Minister manages to recover and declares that Fatakeshto is innocent. He also pursues Fatakeshto to stand in election and become the Home Minister. Upon becoming the Minister Fatakeshto gave a speech that I would like to quote:

"I am firstly a goonda then a Minister. I would like to make one thing clear. Whenever I receive a complaint from ordinary people [sadharan manush], whether it is against a Minister or a bureaucrat – I shall beat him up badly [pediye brindaban dekhiye debo]. These seven days you have seen the trailer, next five years you shall see the whole film." (translation mine).

The Sequel: Minister Fatakeshto

Before moving on to the analysis of the Fatakeshto icon we may quickly note that following the huge success of the first film there was a sequel, this time named, *Minister Fatakeshto*[19], which was also a box-office hit. It also starred Mithun Chakraborty as Fatakeshto and Koel Mallick as the brave journalist. This film was also directed by Swapan Saha.

Minister Fatakeshto is also a story about seven days. Here the villain is an industrialist named Raj Burman who in the name of investing in West Bengal actually wants to colonise the state. Here also we find that the Chief Minister is a noble person who wants to build a "Sonar Bangla" i.e. a prosperous Bengal, and has several projects in his hand for which he is looking for investment. All the key Ministers and politicians are however with the villainous industrialist. Except of course Fatakeshto. At one point in the film the Finance Minister, played by veteran actor Dipankar Dey, gives Fatakeshto the challenge to take up the job of the Finance Minister and show how the huge debt of the state can be recovered without attracting investment from outside.

Fatakeshto therefore takes up the challenge and through various means, including collecting small donations in "laxmir-bhar" (piggy bank) from ordinary people who generously donate for Fatakeshto. All efforts on part of the villainous industrialist and his cohort of Ministers are foiled by Fatakeshto and the brave journalist. The film ends with a fight sequence, somewhat similar to Hong Kong martial arts films where Fatakeshto single-handedly beats up about hundred odd martial arts trained hoodlums of Raj Burman and kills him as well.

There is not much change in the way Fatakeshto is portrayed in the second film although we do not see his son any more. He remains a middle-aged angry "goonda" without any romantic interest now that his wife is dead.

Many meanings of "Goonda"

Fatakeshto is not the first representation of a "goonda" in Bengal[20]. We can trace a literary genealogy which goes back to the late 1920s and early 1930s. Authors such as Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay and Manish Ghatak wrote short stories where the "goonda" or the hoodlum has been referred to. It is around this time that the "goonda" began to register his presence in *bhadralok* literature. The "goonda" was used by such new-generation authors both as a character in their stories as well as a metaphor for a certain form of manliness that is the Other of the genteel *bhadralok*. In Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Dui Dik*[21], we find a "goonda" named Noor Miyan. He was a notorious criminal of the locality, had three mistresses and sold cocaine. During a riot, he was heavily injured and came to a doctor named Binod, who is the central character of the story. Binod was a young idealist doctor. For him every patient who comes to him deserves to be treated. Thus although Binod's assistant was against the treatment of a notorious criminal Binod decided to go ahead and take him up as a patient. His treatment finally cures Noor Miyan and as a result he becomes a changed man and gave up cocaine addiction. The bhadralok doctor was triumphant in transforming a beastly human being.

In Manik Bandyopadhyay's "Goonda"[22], we find a goonda named Felna who is in a spot of trouble and he needs a lawyer as he has been sentenced to ten years of imprisonment. In comes Shyamlal, a lower middle-class bhadralok lawyer, who envies Shyamlal's physique but admires his own cerebral superiority. But unlike the

doctor previously who only saw the "goonda" as a beast to be reformed, for Shyamlal the emotions are more complex, a mixture of superiority and envy.

However the word "goonda" also acquired a more complex meaning through the pen of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and Manish Ghatak. From a characterization of a particular type of criminal, i.e. a human being in flesh and blood, it became a metaphor for manly vigour. In Saradindu's *Bijoyi*[23] (The winner) we find an under confident boy named Nonigopal. He suffers from an excessive sense of fear and was bullied in school. Noni's fear was perhaps also reflective of the fear of the colonized modern vis-a-vis the white master. Noni ultimately overcame his acute sense of inferiority and fear through a physical fight with a white student. This won him many admirers and his friends said, "We always knew that although he is a quiet chap, inside he is a real goonda." In the pen of post-Tagore avant-garde writer Manish Ghatak, the word "goonda" acquires another distinct meaning. In the story *Swaha*[24], a young woman of Kolkata's high society named Lottie is introduced to young man named Shankar by her father. He is by no means a hoodlum or ruffian but a self-made gentleman who does not necessarily subscribe to all norms of society and was not from one of the traditional high society families. He is described by Lottie's father as a "goonda" in contrast to another suitor of hers, Tutu Mollick, who lives of his father's wealth. Lottie was torn between Shankar whom she craved for and Tutu Mollick whom her dominating mother wanted her to marry. In the end she failed to break out of her mother's grip and chose to marry Tutu Mollick although Shankar wanted her. This proved to be a disaster as Tutu Mollick turned out to be a lousy husband and Lottie finally committed suicide.

Fatakeshto as "Goonda"

The way in which Fatakeshto is a departure from previous cultural representations of the "goonda" is that Fatakeshto is the first goonda in Bengali cultural space to become a MLA and a Minister, i.e. a political leader. Early in course of sequel *Minister Fatakeshto* there is a rap song sung by Mithun Chakraborty himself which I shall

firstly reproduce in Bengali and then try to make a translation. It goes as follows:

Merechi parar rockey adda re
Agey to chilam local goonda re
Aajke noi aami karo under-e
Dekhabo amar koto funda re
Minister…ami Minister
Fatakeshto Fatakeshto
Aami Montri Fatakeshto
Netar shashon bhashon manei
Battela aar dhop
Dhoper chopey dhalbo re jol
Mere debo full stop
Jader bhotey godi peli
Tader kotha bhuley
Thanda ghore thakle neta
Nebo kancha khule
Fatakeshto Fatakeshto Aami montri Fatakeshto
Aajke jara sorbo hara
Pete bhaat nei fix
Tader jonyo korchi korbo
Kore jabo politics
Kono rongey nei to aami
Rong bajitey aachi
Rajneeti te dunombori
Dekhley marbo kanchi.

The song starts by saying that Fatakeshto was once upon a local goonda who used to spend idle time in the neighbourhood chatting with friends. However now he is no more working under someone and has become a Minister and he will show the world how intelligent and knowledgeable he is. The rule of "*Neta*" (political leader) is all about tall tales and lies, Fatakeshto shall put an end to such misleading of the public. Those who get elected by the voters,

if they forget them, then he will expose such leaders. For those who do not have two square meals in a day Fatakeshto shall be fighting for them as a politician. He is not in any party but will keep fighting against corruption in politics.

Readers who can understand the meaning of the Bengali sentences above would know that this English translation is only partly what this song is about. An important element of the song is the use of a certain kind of Bengali slang that will not be approved within the norms of Bengali *bhadralok* society. And the song deliberately offends *bhadralok* sensibilities both in terms of the use of Bengali slang as well as in the visualization of the song where scantily clad girls who surprisingly look "foreign", dance to beat of the song accompanying Fatakeshto in a surreal backdrop which in a way momentarily erases the physical space that Fatakeshto lives.

This song is to my mind an example of what Ashish Nandy has described as the slum view of Indian politics[25]. There are three key elements that get combined into one combustible mix in the song – a sexual fantasy (scantily clad "foreign" looking dancing girls), a democratic fantasy (Fatakeshto shall fight against all corrupt political leaders) and a developmental fantasy (Fatakeshto shall fight for those who do not have square meals a day).

Out of the three fantasies, the first one is not important in the two films on Fatakeshto, except in this song. Fatakeshto is in fact extraordinarily non-sexual – in MLA Fatakeshto we see a sari clad wife but there is no sexual overtone in their interaction in the film. In course of the film his wife dies and in the sequel there is no romantic/sexual interest of Fatakeshto. The young female journalist in both the films is not romantically attached to Fatakeshto but looks up to him as the savior. Though a "goonda", Fatakeshto is almost a monk in his personal life. There is nothing about Fatakeshto's behavior that offends the sexual norms of *bhadralok* society.

It is the democratic and developmental fantasies that make Fatakeshto different from earlier literary representations of "goonda" in Bengal. This makes Fatakeshto also different from the angry young man image in Hindi cinema that made Amitabh Bachchan famous. "Bachchan" was typically someone who was against the system and was often involved in activities that were criminal in nature (Deewar, Don) and sometimes hardly well-behaved (Sharabi). Fatakeshto is however very different. He is not the destroyer of the system or the *bhadralok* society but in fact the true *bhadralok's* last hope.

Although the films are dominated by Mithun Chakraborty as Fatakeshto and to some extent Koel Mallick as the young female journalist apart from the baddies, the character that is crucial to understanding Fatakeshto is the Chief Minister played by Soumitra Chatterjee. In terms of screen time the Chief Minister occupies a small proportion of the time. However the two films can be seen as a fight between the two sides of the *bhadralok* – the good *bhadralok* represented by the Chief Minister who is a former teacher and speaks impeccable chaste Bengali and the bad *bhadralok* represented by majority of the Ministers in the cabinet who are either themselves the villain (Ranadeb Bose the Home Minister in MLA Fatakeshto) or have tied up with the villain (Raj Burman in Minsiter Fatakeshto). It is the noble, good *bhadralok* who needs a warrior (not very different from the Jedi in the Star Wars) to wipe out the bad blood from the *bhadralok*'s world. This is where Fatakeshto fits in.

Fatakeshto is the icon of the subaltern's fantasy of empowerment – an ordinary goonda becomes a MLA and a Minister, when he fights the opponents are not even able to put up a resistance and he is able to solve the problems of the state within seven days. He is an embodiment of a fantasy of development where law and order is restored, where the corrupt is punished, where the unemployed start their own business, where the debt of a state is recovered within seven days, where old pensioners do not any more have to pay bribe to get pension, where women are not harassed, where the criminal-police-politician nexus which controls 'democratic' politics is ruthlessly punished. In short a liberal democratic world is restored but through the illiberal means of a hero whose character is without any blemish and who never sheds a drop of blood in any fight sequence. The makers of the film have not made any attempt to make Fatakeshto believable, a character with different shades (like Amitabh in Dewaar or Salman Khan in Dabangg for example). He is rather the fantasy of security and peace in a world where the dream of democracy and development is almost on the verge of collapse. At the beginning of *Minister Fatakeshto*, Chaitali Ray, the young female journalist, meets a criminal and says that she has found out the criminal runs so many gambling dens and other illegal

businesses. The criminal is unfazed and says that he is aware of all this and moves forward to molest her. At this moment Fatakeshto appears and mercilessly beats up the criminal and his men who fly off in different directions when Fatakeshto kicks them. In reality of course Fatakeshto never appears as very high rate of crime against women in Bengal testifies. Fatakeshto is the fantasy of a superman that is perceived to be the savior and the protector of the *bhadralok* Chief Minister's *Sonar Bangla*.

Development as the Fantasy of the Governed

Fatakeshto, the *goonda* who becomes a Minister, we have argued so far, is a product of popular fantasy, a fantasy of development, restoration of order and delivery of justice played out on the silver screen. But what happens in the real world? Does fantasy disappear and is replaced by the harsh reality of quotidian negotiations which are partly legal and partly illegal as has been described by Partha Chatterjee in his celebrated essay, "The Politics of the Governed", a world where subaltern groups living on the edge of the society form the population groups which negotiates with different forms of governmental control and the developmental machinery of the state in order to survive?

Without disagreeing with Chatterjee, I would argue that this is only part of the story. Democratic politics also involves selling of developmental fantasies to such population groups who do not necessarily belong to the civil society or the governing elite but are nonetheless numerically significant under the system of universal adult franchise. Such fantasies are to be distinguished from tangible benefits such as an ICDS centre or an electricity connection. Such fantasies are also to be distinguished from political ideology such as Nationalism, Marxism or Neo-liberalism. Some of the techniques of selling developmental fantasies to the electorate are not very different from the way it is sold in popular cinema like the two *Fatakeshto* films discussed above.

Let me illustrate. If one considers the rise of populist politics in India in recent time we shall see that many of the techniques of popular cinema are regularly used by the populist parties. The first such technique is the creation of a larger than life icon, who shall be the deliverer of justice and development – Fatakeshto on the silver

screen, the leader of the populist party in real life. This larger than life personality usually has impeccable moral virtues and is completely dedicated to the development of the state/country and bringing justice to the downtrodden. Secondly, in both cases the icon will represent society of the downtrodden and not the elite civil society. Fatakeshto never forgets to emphasize that he is a "goonda" whereas the PR machinery of populist parties would highlight the humble background of their leader. The third technique is that of identifying a "villain" – corrupt Ministers and businessmen in case of Fatakeshto, a ruling party in case of the populist party. Fourth, there are parallels in terms of solutions that are simple and easy to understand – Fatakeshto smashes a corrupt ration dealer and serves justice, the populist leader would insist on something similar as well. Fifth, delivery of justice and development is to be done at great speed and here one need not pay attention to liberal procedural niceties. Fatakeshto solves all problems within seven days, populist leaders would also promise to deliver certain things within a short time limit.

Finally, there is a strong element of melodrama in the way each of the icons is projected to the masses. This melodramatisation has two forms – one is aimed at projecting the heroic and the other aimed at showcasing the lovable "I am one of you" image. When Fatakeshto, for example, enters the screen for the first time we see the earth crack as his feet lands on the floor but then we also find that he is afraid of his wife who is angry for his late return home. This is aimed at generating both awe as well as affection. Similarly in case of populist leadership also there is a constant projection of these two sides – the "rough and tough" image of the person who can deliver justice and the "one of us" image where the leader comes across as my next door neighbour, perhaps even a relative of mine.

The entire purpose of such image making exercises is to create a psychological bond between the leader and the electorate. When the leader is thus perceived as a part of the voter's self-identity, the voter becomes a blind follower of the leader and the populist party. Rolling out of various kind benefits is also part of this process of creating emotional dependency. The purpose of rolling out development programmes for populist leaders is to create a sense of "feel good", a sense of "the leader cares for you because s/he is one of you" rather than to achieve the targets of MDG. This explains

why populist leaders pay so little attention to quality health care or quality education, much to the surprise of the elite of UN and other international development agencies.

This means that "development" as understood in academic and professional circles – GDP growth rate, Human Development Index, achievement of Millennium Development Goals etc – is the development discourse of the developmental elite. This discourse operates on the logic of rights and is based on measurable data. But to understand the development discourse of the political society, which is more electorally significant, we may need to pay greater attention to popular films like *MLA Fatakeshto* and *Minister Fatakeshto* and understand why the audience goes crazy each time Mithun Chakraborty says "Maarbo ekhane, laash porbe swashaney."

MP Fatakeshto

On 19 January 2014, The Telegraph carried the following headline: "MP Mithun: Mamata picks actor for Rajya Sabha." The news item went on to say:

MLA Fatakeshto directed by Swapan Saha, *Minister Fatakesto*, directed by Swapan Saha…Coming soon: MP Fatakeshto, directed by Mamata Banerjee.[26]

The news item went on to say that Mithun Chakraborty was a popular actor who was once close to the Left but drifted away after the death of Jyoti Basu. Now he has been nominated as the Member of Parliament on behalf of Trinamool Congress. In her facebook page Mamata Banerjee, according to the report, wrote, "In our state, five Rajya Sabha members will be elected this time. One of these seats will be given to Mithun Chakraborty from the All India Trinamool Congress…Chakraborty is a well-known film personality. He has devoted his entire life to the cause of cultural and social activities with great success." Downplaying the links Mithun Chakraborty had with the Left regime, especially Subhas Chakraborty, the report quoted an unknown TMC leader that "everybody knows that he was close to Subhas Chakraborty during the heyday of the Left Front Government. But the popular sentiment attached with Mithunda cannot be underestimated and she will use him extensively in the Lok Sabha campaign". Clearly Fatakeshto has come a long way from the days of Hope 86 when he helped

Subhas Chakraborty to bring super stars like Amitabh Bacchan to participate.

The choice of Mithun Chakraborty as the Rajya Sabha MP was preceded by choice of Lok Sabha MPs like Tapas Paul and Satabdi Roy in 2009 and Dev, Moonmoon Sen and Sandhya Ray for the election of 2014. Clearly this was a break from the Left tradition of promoting *bhadralok* culture championed by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. The distinction between popular cinema and democratic politics thus got blurred in the dusty roads of electoral campaigns.

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7

Towards Electoral Defeat of the Left Front, 2006 - 2011

In the 2006 Assembly election, the Left Front won 233 seats out of 294 seats. All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC) won 30 seats while the Indian National Congress (INC) won 21 seats. In the Assembly election of 2011, Trinamool Congress (TMC) won 184 seats, TMC ally INC won 42 seats and the Left Front won 62 seats. While there is nothing unusual about a party losing in an election, we need to find an explanation as to why the Left Front's fortune changed so dramatically between 2006 and 2011. This cannot be explained, to my mind, through an analysis of policy as the Left Front followed more or less the same policy from the time Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee came to power in 2000 or perhaps even earlier when Jyoti Basu inaugurated the new industrial policy in 1994. There was no dramatic swing in policy from pro-peasant to anti-peasant after 2006 as land acquisition was nothing new either. In my view the explanation requires a close reading of political events of the state between 2006 and 2009 that the Left Front failed to manage administratively and politically. These failures opened the floodgates of earlier resentments against the Left Front which coalesced around the principal opposition leader Mamata Banerjee. This chapter therefore would look at the political failures of the Left and also explore what moves the opposition made in order to dramatically transform its fortunes.

Singur[1]

On 18 May 2006, the West Bengal Government and one of India's

biggest industrial house, TATA, held a joint press-conference in which they announced that TATA has decided to set up the factory for their small car project at Singur in the district of Hooghly. Around 700 acres were required for the TATA factory and around 300 acres were required for the ancillary industries, it was announced. It was also said that around 10,000 jobs would be directly and indirectly created as a result of this project. The news came as a surprise to most people including the farmers of Singur, a section of whom almost immediately started to protest. By the end of the month both TATA officials and officials of West Bengal government had to face intense agitation at the site of the project. An organisation named *Krishijami Bachao Committee* (Save Agricultural Land Committee) was formed and demonstrations were made in front of the BDO's office. Industries Minister Nirupam Sen also faced an agitating crowd when he went to Singur to explain the situation and persuade the farmers. Between 19 and 24 July 2006, the state government issued 13 notices for land acquisition under Section 9(1) of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. In response the agitators blocked the Durgapur Expressway and later in the month of August carried out several demonstrations in front of the panchayat and BDO offices and tried to halt the land acquisition process. The agitation was by this time big news and widely covered by the print and electronic media. In spite of the agitation West Bengal Government was confident of completing the process of land acquisition before the *Puja*s. By 31 August the authorities received consent for 303 acres.

The agitation however continued unfazed. A tactic that came to be used by the protestors was to put the women in the front and this helped to ward off the officials in the project villages. By September 2006, the issue was not only the most important one in the state but also thanks to internet and the electronic media, it became international news. In fact, at the Panchayat Department we were somewhat jealous of the kind of media attention Singur was getting. We thought we were doing something far more significant in terms of reforming the Panchayat system and trying to initiate grass-root planning, etc., but we received zero attention. The problem was that there was no drama in our work, no big industrialist versus small peasant, David TMC versus Goliath CPI(M). We could only watch what was going on.

There were several suggestions to the Left Front at this stage to re-think the project and urge the TATAs to set up the factory in an alternative site. But the ruling party felt that it need not re-think its strategy and it was only a matter of time before the weak opposition parties and sundry civil society groups would accept defeat. On 27 September 2006, SUCI and CPI-ML called for a 12-hour *bandh* (general strike) and there was an announcement on part of Mamata Banerjee also that there would be a bandh on 9 October 2006. At this stage Congress tried to play a mediating role. It on the one hand shared the dais with TMC after several years but also urged the Government to take the opposition in confidence. By this time also there were several alleged cases of police atrocity and a protestor named Rajkumar Bhool died on 28 September and was declared as the first martyr by the Singur Agricultural Land Protection Committee. A bandh was observed by the opposition on 11 October but the Chief Minister also confirmed that the Government was in possession of the 1,000 acres of land.

During October there were several cases of allegations against lumpen elements associated with CPI(M) vandalising property in protesting villages in order to create pressure on the protestors. One such act was to damage the pumping station through which water reached the fields of the protesting villages. On the other side noted activists Medha Patkar and Mahasweta Devi joined hands with the protestors. By early November state government started to deploy troops in the region. On 17 November, TMC supporters blocked Central Avenue in Kolkata to protest against the acquisition of land which caused massive traffic dislocation. On 30 November, Section 144 was clamped on the region and Mamata Banerjee was not allowed to enter. In retaliation the TMC supporters torched buses and blocked roads. The TMC MLAs also ransacked the State Assembly. The state government meanwhile started fencing of the area around the project site. Several protesting villagers were arrested. There were allegations of atrocity on behalf of the Rapid Action Force (RAF).

On 4 December 2006, Mamata Banerjee started a hunger strike at Esplanade in Kolkata. On 18 December, at dawn the charred body of Tapasi Malik, a young woman was found at the factory site. She was said to be one of the activists against land acquisition. An FIR was lodged in which it was alleged that she was raped and

killed when she went for early morning nature's call. After protests from Krishi Jami Banchao Committee (KJBC) and human rights activists the case was transferred to CBI by the state government. On 28 December, Mamata Banerjee ended her fast at Esplanade. On the same day an elderly couple, Tinkari Dey (55) and his wife Maya (50) who had parted with their land, were found dead under mysterious circumstances. They had earlier collected their compensation cheques.

Thus, by end of 2006, the project was in a giant mess with at least four persons dead. A significant number of city intellectuals like Mahasweta Devi and Kabir Suman and national level activists like Medha Patkar had joined hands with TMC, which helped to boost the image of Mamata Banerjee as an opposition leader. On the other hand questions were raised regarding Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's Marxist credentials and his capacity as an administrator. From a small-car project by a private company it became a battle-royale between Left Front and TMC led opposition. The two sides stood adamant and unwilling to make a compromise.

Meanwhile in the same year the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme based on the historic National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was rolled out all over the country including West Bengal. It promised up to hundred days of wage labour to whoever applied for work at the local panchayats. This was potentially far more significant than the Singur project but received very little attention from the political parties, the media and the intellectuals.

The pattern described above continued through the early part of 2007. The year started with allegations by the opposition that there are discrepancies in the Status Report presented by the Government. While this was being debated on the electronic media there was another death, this time the uncle of Tapasi Maik, Astu Malik (48). In January the TATAs also started the construction of the factory with a Bhumi Puja. Some officials of TATA who wanted to show some panchayat leaders their community development work in Jamshedpur in order to gain trust were allegedly manhandled at Singur while the TMC staged protest in front TATA offices in Kolkata. On 23 January, there were attempts on part of the protestors to enter the factory site and destroy the site where the Bhumi Puja was held. On 14 February 2007, while protests were going on at Singur, The High Court said that the land acquisition

was valid and in accordance with law but also quashed the imposition of Section 144. On 9 March 2007, the TATAs got possession of the land but in the same month on 11 March, another farmer, Haradhan Bag committed suicide. On 18 March, a minor explosion damaged the wall of the factory. Meanwhile the Government tried to improve the compensation package. It was also announced in April that youths from the Singur area would receive vocational training from the TATAs.

Through April and May skirmishes continued in the project area while there was also an emerging trend that the two sides should sit together to arrive at an amicable solution. On 4 June, former Chief Minister Jyoti Basu invited Mamata Banerjee for talks at his residence, which Ms Banerjee accepted. There was discussion regarding providing alternative plot of land to the 'unwilling' farmers. However, by 6 June, Mamata Banerjee backtracked. She refused to take alternative land for the 'unwilling farmers' as a solution. She claimed that land that was acquired for the project site would have to be returned which the Government refused and hence Jyoti Basu's mediation failed.

The Left Front however received a blow at this stage when on 28 June Suhrid Dutta, CPI(M)'s Zonal Committee Secretary from Singur was charged with the murder of Tapasi Malik by CBI. Another party leader Debu Malik was also arrested. CPI(M) denied that the two were involved in the murder. The next few months remained heated around this incident while sporadic skirmishes continued at the factory site. Suhrid Datta was charge-sheeted by CBI on 15 September. Later on however he was released on bail by the High Court in February 2009. In a bizarre twist to the story the CBI investigator (Deputy Superintendent of Police, Crime Branch) Partha Sarathi Bose, was arrested for taking bribe and sent to prison.

On 22 September 2007, there was another case of death when Srikanta Shee (37) was found hanging from a tree. The police described this as a suicide. On 19 October there was another round of violence in Singur where at least 20 persons including some policemen were injured. Meanwhile the Supreme Court also gave a judgment which said that government does not have the right to acquire fertile agriculture land for a private company. This resulted in a fresh case being opened in the Calcutta High Court. Towards the end of the year, on 17 December another person, Shankar Patra

(48) was found hanging in the cattle shed behind his mud house.

On 18 January 2008, the Left Front Government got a boost when the High Court dismissed all 11 petitions against land acquisitions in Singur. However the agitation at Singur continued and on 8 February the protestors and TMC blocked the Durgapur Express way which caused severe traffic congestion. On 25 February, the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation's surveyors were heckled at the project site.

The next few months saw the TMC reaping rich dividends in the Panchayat Election that took place in 2008. In Singur Block of Hooghly district TMC won 16 out of 16 gram panchayats although the zila parishad went to CPI(M). Nearly 50 per cent of the gram panchayats of the state for the first time went to the opposition and two zila parishads—South 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur—were also lost to TMC. Congress won the Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur zila parishads and narrowly lost Murshidabad to CPI(M). The toll for CPI(M) was heaviest in southern Bengal.

Following this relative victory, Mamata Banerjee announced that the Government must immediately return the land that was taken from 'unwilling' farmers. She however clarified that she is open to the factory being constructed on 600 acres of land, but 400 acres would have to be returned. The Governor, Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, tried to mediate between the two parties and did manage to bring the Chief Minister and the TMC leader on the same table but the tensions were not fully resolved. Under such circumstances the TATAs announced on 3 October 2008 that they would be shifting the project to Gujarat. Ratan Tata specifically blamed Mamata Banerjee for the decision to pull out of the state.[2]

There is no doubt however that the sustained agitation, coupled with the agitation at Nandigram during the same time, helped TMC to spectacularly revive its fortunes in the state. From a party that was hardly taken seriously after the wipe out in the 2006 elections, it managed to transform itself into a party with a strong peasant base and significant intellectual support. How CPI(M) could feel that it was not losing its peasant base even after a year of having trouble will remain a mystery. Clearly the famous 'machinery' of the party at the grass-root level was not able to send the right signals to the top or the people at the top were not able to listen. It will also remain a mystery as to why Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee felt that the

TATA project was a prestige battle for him. It was after all just a project and it could have been left to the relevant department to handle just as the project I was working in was left to the Panchayat Department. That would have helped to reduce media hype if nothing else. There was also very little preparation in terms of awareness campaign, involvement of panchayats and developing a suitable compensation package beforehand. CPI(M) it seemed was willing to risk its peasant vote bank in order to win this battle and committed its first act of self-destruction. The second of course was Nandigram, happening simultaneously, to which we now turn.

NANDIGRAM[3]

Exactly what happened at Nandigram unfortunately remains a mystery except for some of the facts on certain important dates. Nonetheless let me try to weave together a narrative.[4] But before we move on the specific case we must remind ourselves that the district of Purba Medinipur is a reasonably developed district, with human development indicators that almost matches that of Kerala. In other words it is one of the districts that have actually enjoyed the fruits of Left Front rule unlike a district such as Purulia or Uttar Dinajpur. Undivided Medinipur was a hotbed of nationalist politics and later of Leftist activism. In 2003 panchayat elections Left Front won almost all the seats. What is not clear to me is how strong was the anti-Left Front sentiment before the announcement of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Nandigram. Was a tension developing between 2003 and 2006 that we are not aware of and did this tension finally help the opposition to mobilise the people against the SEZ? Unfortunately there is no clear answer as to what was happening in Nandigram prior to the announcement of the SEZ. With this unsolved mystery as a prelude, let us move on to the story of the SEZ itself.

The story starts in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, where on 25 August 2005, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Salim Group. It was agreed that the Salim Group would play the developer's role to promoting an industrial park in the nature of a SEZ. At this point the matter did not raise any eyebrow in Bengal. Almost a year later, on 14

June 2006, Beni Santoso, Chairman of the Salim Group visited Kolkata. This was a much publicised event and although Mamata Banerjee staged a protest, she had any following as her credibility was at its rock bottom. The next day, CPI(M) leader of Purba Medinipur, Mr Laxman Seth showed Mr Santoso the land that was proposed for the SEZ. Santoso was satisfied and said that the Salim Group would require 27,000 acres to set up the SEZ out of which 15,000 acres would be at Nandigram and 12,000 acres would be at Haldia. An agreement to this effect was signed between the Government of West Bengal and the Salim Group on 31 July.

By August SUCI, TMC and Jamait-i-Ulema Hind formed several organisations such as the *Krishak Ucched Birodhi O Janaswartho Roksha Committee*. By October the news of land acquisition at Singur had spread to Nandigram and there was fear that massive amount of cultivable land would be acquired by the Government. Proving the fear to be true, the Haldia Development Authority issued a notice on land acquisition The next day, in a public meeting called at Nandigram bus stand the names of 27 mouzas of Nandigram I block were announced. By second January the list of earmarked mouzas were sent to concerned GPs of Nandigram I and Khejuri II.

Clearly, Laxman Seth had overestimated his authority over the region. The next day the first clash between the police and the protestors took place at Garchakraberia GP. There were allegations of firing without any provocation. Five villagers were injured in the firing. As a result the villagers damaged roads and bridges and blocked roads with boulders and tree trunks to prevent police forces from entering the villages. What followed from here onwards in a classic case of failure to manage discontent on part of the administration under an inexperienced District Magistrate. Whether a more astute administrator would have handled matters differently and better remains a question to which there cannot be any easy answer. But there was certainly room for better administrative skills.

On 4 January 2007, in a provocative move, a CPI(M) office was set on fire a Rajaramchak. Party office in Sonachura was put under lock and key. It is not clear exactly who did this. About 250 CPI(M) supporters were forced to flee from home. The various different committees of protestors were also brought under one banner, *Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee* (BUPC), with local TMC leader from Kanthi, Mr Sisir Adhikari, as its president.

Faced with this provocation, local CPI(M) reacted like an injured bull in a bull fighting arena. It set up a number of camps at Satkhanda in Khejuri II Block that surrounded the protesting villages. Arms were amassed on both sides. To add fuel to the fire, state-level veteran leader, Binoy Konar said on 6 January, 'If they want to do things democratically, we shall reciprocate. But if they make things difficult for us, we are prepared to make life hell for them.' Hardly anybody was in the mood to do things democratically, and by the evening of the 6th bombs were being hurled and bullets were being fired in a battle that lasted through the night and onto the next day. At least six persons died from both sides and house of CPI(M) leader Debangshu Sasmal was set on fire. BUPC observed 24-hour bandh. As expected, political parties blamed each other for the violence. However what is interesting is that even after 7 January the administration did not take strong measures to weed out the seeds of violence from the area and start a process of grievance redressal in a peaceful manner. It is also strange that arms could be acquired so easily by the hooligans on both sides.

The police did intervene but in a feeble manner. Six rounds of bullets were fired in the air to chase away protestors at Dinabandhunagar. But the fighting continued. The District Magistrate called for an all-party meeting but did very little once that meeting failed to arrive at any solution. There was still time to establish administrative control over the region without using violent methods but that was not done.

On 9 January, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee said that it was a mistake on part of the Haldia Development Authority to issue a notice, and said somewhat dramatically, that it should be torn apart (*chirey felo*). This showed confusion within the ranks of the CPI(M). On 10 and 11 two meetings between the SDO of Haldia and the BDO of Khejuri with BUPC failed. By next day the situation acquired a national dimension as noted civil rights activist Medha Patkar held a meeting at Hazrakata in Nandigram and rather provocatively dared CPI(M) state leadership to come to Nandigram and say to the villagers that they are acquiring land. Meanwhile the SDO of Haldia called for another meeting on the 19th but BUPC did not attend it. On 10 February a policeman, Sub-inspector Sadhu Chatterjee, was found dead near an adjoining river. It is not clear as to who is responsible for this attack.

Meanwhile, on 11 February Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee addressed a public gathering at Heria in Khejuri 1 and said that Government of West Bengal is in no hurry to acquire land and would first explain to the people how the chemical hub would benefit them. If they did not want the hub then the project would be shifted elsewhere. The situation cooled down a bit after this and in an all-party meeting at Tamluk on 19 February it was decided that there would be a cease fire between the two sides at least till the end of the Madhyamik exams (Class 10 level exam). On 5 and 10 March, the District Magistrate called for two all-party meetings which the opposition did not attend. It was decided by the administration at this stage that the roads that have been dug up will be repaired. This however led to rumours in the villages that the police were planning to invade and brutally crack-down on the villagers and tension began to mount. Clearly, after Bhattacharjee's speech on 11 Feburary there was scope for launching a public relations drive by the administration to reduce tension and spread of rumours. Instead they called for closed-door meetings which the opposition boycotted. On 13 March, Mr Subhendu Adhikari of TMC sent a fax message to the Chief Minister that 'police authorities have created panic among the common people of Nandigram.' The Chief Minister and the state and district administration clearly failed to read the message and understand the ground reality. BUPC on its turn once more decided to play the bull-fighting game of provoking the bull. It began to mobilise the villagers to come for a Puja and Koran reading session on the next day when the police would try to cross the cut made by the protesting villagers.

Therefore between 11 February and 13 March the situation once again became heated although it was already announced that land would not be acquired without consent. Here the situation was quite different from Singur where the Government was trying to acquire land. However Nandigram had become a big story in the television channels and that further added to the developing tensions.

On 14 March, the police began to move toward the protesting villages at around 10 am They faced a crowd of 20,000–25,000 protestors led by women. It is not clear exactly why the police decided to open fire at an unarmed crowd led by women and children. Clearly they were not capable of thinking with a cool

head. 14 people died and around 75 were injured. There were also allegations of rape and sexual assault. However this widely reported incident will remain to some extent a mystery. Were the women at the front instructed to insult the police? Was it a deliberate ploy to provoke the hot-headed and indisciplined police force? Or was it a deliberate attempt at teaching the protestors a lesson that they would never forget and break their morale? But there is no doubt that this incident reflected the failure of the district administration to understand the ground reality and act in an intelligent manner. This is true either way – if they lost their nerve or if they decided to teach unarmed protestors a lesson.

The incident, needless to say, became a massive media event and very rightly led to wide spread condemnation. Writers and artists like Mahasweta Devi, Sankho Ghosh, Nabarun Bhattacharyya, Jaya Mitra, Aparna Sen, Kabir Suman, Bibhash Chakrabarty and Bratya Basu were among those who took the lead in the public protest. CPI(M)'s pro-poor image was damaged beyond repair. The bull-fighting technique of the opposition worked perhaps better than they expected.

Immediately after the fateful incident on 14 March, a Division Bench headed by Chief Justice S.S. Nijjar ordered CBI probe. On 20 March, Government of West Bengal ordered a CID probe into the incident. The Government had no option at this stage but to accept responsibility. On 29 March, at a programme organised by DYFI, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee claimed full responsibility of the incident and said that the Nandigram project has been scrapped. However by early September a different line of thinking had emerged. On 3 September the Government announced that a chemical hub would be set up at Nayachar, 30 kilometres away from Nndigram. However the site would be finalised only after an environmental impact assessment.

By end of October the situation at Nandigram again became heated as there was fresh violence at the local level. On 28 October two party offices of CPI(M) were torched and TMC in turn alleged that a convoy of Mamata Banerjee was hit by a bullet fired from a CPI(M) office while she was traveling in the Nandigram region. On 4 November, Brinda Karat, gave expression to the renewed sense of aggression on part of CPI(M) when she alleged at a meeting in Kolkata that TMC was indulging in opportunistic politics and those

who were hatching this conspiracy should be given *dum dum dawai* (beaten black and blue). Perhaps Ms Karat's aggression had something to do with the fact that SFI had lost the JNU student union election the day before. On the very next day, 5 November, there was a battle between CPI(M) and BUPC. This was the beginning of a war unleashed by local CPI(M) to regain control over villages over which BPUC was now reigning. By 6 November, the situation had become such that Home Secretary, Prasad Ranjan Ray had to describe it as 'war-like situation'. As CPI(M) continued to gain more and more control over the region its rhetoric became more and more aggressive. On 10 November, CPI(M) accused the Governor Shri Gopal Gandhi of partisanship. Meanwhile intellectuals in Kolkata boycotted the Kolkata Film Festival.

On 12 November, CPI(M) organised a 'victory rally' at Nandigram. CRPF troops were able to enter the villages only after the victory rally was carried out. By this time Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's apologetic tone had disappeared. On the same day he said that the 'opposition has been paid back in their own coin.'

Although by this time CPI(M) had by force regained control over its 'lost' area there were signs of its loss of hegemony. The first indication of this was in a small school committee election on 10 February 2008, when CPI(M) lost in the two schools where elections were held. It was perhaps too small an incident for CPI(M) to take note of. Sporadic clashes continued between February and May. On 21 May, Panchayat election results came out resulting in heavy defeat for the Left Front. TMC won the zila parishad of Purba Medinapur for the first time. CPI(M)'s share in the zila parishad was reduced from 50 out of 52 in 2003 to 16 out of 52 in 2008. On 27 May, TMC conducted its victory rally.

While all these were happening, there were a couple of interesting incidents around me that perhaps deserves recollection. There is no doubt that Nandigram shook even the die-hard CPI(M) loyalists. Some of my friends began to admit that there was a rot in the party which needed to be arrested. However an interesting reaction came from a highly educated young academic. Her position was that yes Nandigram cannot be condoned, but the party was in danger and therefore the need of the hour was to stand by the party rather than to criticize it. The comment reflected a very strange kind of psychological dependence on the entity called the party which was

almost like the church, which had to be defended in its hour of crisis even though all was not right about it.

The second incident took place at a relative's place after the panchayat election. A relative of mine is a member of the party. He asked me, over a drink, what was my reaction to the loss of CPI(M) in the Panchayat election? I said somewhat sarcastically that what does my knowledge matter when CPI(M) has its own famous machinery? He said that yes, they have internal information, but it would be good to have my opinion as an independent person working in the panchayat department. So I gave him my explanation. Then after a moment of silence he said that what was worrying was not that the party had lost the election but the fact that the party was unable to predict it, which means that the information system of the party was not working anymore. We agreed that the district units had become used to bluffing Alimuddin Street and Alimuddin Street had no means of verification independent of the district units.

In January 2010, I had an opportunity to visit Nandigram. By this time TMC was firmly in power in the district. I had an opportunity to meet a cross-section of TMC leaders from panchayat to the zila parishad along with some officials and development professionals. One of the persons I met was Mahadeb Bagh who was in the Nandigram II Panchayat Samity and had participated in the movement against the SEZ. He described the results of the election as an '*oloukik ghotona*', a fantastic event, something that was beyond their imagination. When I tried to find out in what way TMC's approach to panchyat was different from CPI(M)'s there was no clear and prompt answer. Usually the answer came after a bit of thinking, the most important of which was that TMC would not try to run the panchyat through 'remote control'. This was of course wishful thinking. What is important is that the new party had identified what was the element of CPI(M)'s approach that was most hated—the obsession with control by the party office which did not allow the Panchayats to function on their own. In fact, in Amdabad II gram panchayat of Nandigram II block, I found a rather curious case. When I visited the gram panchayat office, police camps were still in place on the ground floor. In this panchayat, CPI(M) won in 2008, but after the debacle of 2009 parliamentary elections, the *pradhan* who was close to Laxman Seth, fled as a result of which there was a power vacuum in the

panchayat. The majority CPI(M) members voted a lady from TMC to become the Pradhan as they found her to be the most competent among all the members. When I asked how this was possible in a state of intense political rivalry, the CPI(M) member I could talk to explained that the future of their villages came before party rivalries. I tried to find out from them a first-hand account of the violence during 2006–08, but they preferred to remain silent. At the most their faces exhibited a wry smile. I got the impression that they wanted to forget those days and move on.

Lalgarh

At both Singur and Nandigram, the West Bengal Police excelled in mismanagement, inefficiency and arrogance. The pattern continued at Lalgarh, a village in Binpur 1 block of Paschim Medinipur. The story began on 2 November 2008, when Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was returning from Shalboni after laying the foundation stone of a steel plant to be set up by the Jindal Group.[5] He was accompanied by Central Ministers, Ram Bilas Paswan and Jatin Prasada. The convoy narrowly escaped a landmine blast, which was the work of the Maoists who had managed to build a base in the region for some time.

While the attack on the Chief Minister and his convoy was deplorable, the situation quickly turned against the Left Front thanks to the West Bengal Police. Instead of carrying out an investigation into the incident in a professional manner the police went on rampage, physically tortured and abused the tribal population including women and children. An incident which took place on 4 November, two days after the blast, shows the incompetence of the police. Three school students, studying in class 8 to class 10 were returning from school and they were picked up by the police as suspected Maoists without any evidence what so ever. The incident sparked off widespread protests by enraged villagers who surrounded the Lalgarh police station demanding their release.

How far the Maoists were instigating the movement of the tribals against the police is not clear. But in all probability the movement at the beginning at least was a movement of the subaltern tribal population outside the umbrella of any political party or middle-class civil society organisation/s (CSOs). On 13 November 2008, a

first-hand report by Partho Sarathi Ray was published in a blog named *Sanhati* which claimed that the police carried out a reign of terror on the night of 6 November in course of which poor men and women were brutally beaten up.[6] Ray's report clearly has its ideological biases but it is probably the first account by a person who actually went to the field and therefore I have chosen his account as a source of information. According to him a woman named Chintamoni Murmu was hit in her eyes by the butt of the gun and another woman, Panamani Hansda, was brutally kicked in her chest because of which she had multiple fractures. Both of them were hospitalised. Chintamani lost her eye. As a consequence of this brutality the next day the tribals rose in revolt and cut off roads, probably inspired by the events of Nandigram. Telephone lines and electricity connections were also disconnected. Ray mentions two traditional organisations at this stage of the movement—the *Bharat Jakat Majhi Madwa Juan Gaonta* and the smaller *Kherwal Jumit Gaonta* taking the lead in the movement. At this early stage the movement was not, according to him, controlled by any particular political party.

By 15 November, a new organisation, *Pulishi Santrash Birodhi Jonosadharoner Committee* (People's Committee Against Police Atrocities), was formed with Sidhu Soren as its Secretary and Chatradhar Mahato as its spokesperson. According to a report in *The Telegraph* (15 November 2008) the new organization was formed following a sense of betrayal by the *Bharat Jakat Majhi Madwa*, the traditional tribal organization of the tribal elders.[7] The report says that the police suspects that this new organisation was created by the Maoists although there is no clear evidence regarding this. Chatradhar Mahato, a former member of Chatra Parishad, the student wing of Congress and a supporter of Mamata Banerjee, emerged as the most important leader of this organisation of the relatively younger tribals. Whether the new leadership were directly under the supervision of the Maoists is not clear, though CPI(M) and the administration had made such a claim, but there is no doubt that within a few days the Maoist had backed the movement. From another report by Partho Sarathi Ray on 16 November 2008, in the same blog mentioned above, it is clear that the traditional organisation of the elders were preferring a moderate line and were willing to negotiate with the administration but the People's

Committee Against Police Atrocities PCPA, consisting of a younger generation, preferred a more aggressive stance. By end of November 2008, PCPA was clearly in the lead of the movement which had spread in many more villages in the district as well as in other districts. Apart from protesting against police atrocities they carried out some experiments with development work on their own. An important feature of their activities was a significant participation by women.

However, it was not possible to maintain the non-political identity of the movement for long. The movement clearly became intertwined with Maoist movement against the state in course of the following months. PCPA also came close to TMC, helping the latter to build a base in the area. A pattern that was seen both in Singur and Nandigram was replicated: (a) a clueless inefficient administration unable to manage the situation; (b) politicisation of the protests against a specific issue leading to a more general conflict with Left Front Government; (c) entry of middle-class 'intellectuals' to lend support to the movement by attacking LFG; (d) local government kept completely out of the process of grievance redressal; (e) the issue getting lot of media attention; (f) escalation of violence between CPI(M) and those opposed to it; and (g) a local issue transforming itself into a national issue involving the Indian state and those who opposed it.

By the middle of 2009 Lalgarh became part of the ongoing war between the Maoists on the one hand and the Indian state on the other. On 17 June 2009, five companies of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and two companies of Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) reached Medinipur. A combined force of the state police and the central forces thus initiated the Operation Green Hunt in West Bengal from 18 June onwards. On 28 September, Chatradhar Mahato, leader of the PCPA was arrested and the violence on both sides continued till the Assembly election of 2011 without any clear victory on either side. However the control of PCPA slowly became diluted as the political parties took the centre-stage of the battle. While CPI(M) lost and TMC gained from the situation, Chatradhar Mahato also lost as an independent candidate in the 2011 Assembly Elections from the Jhargram constituency.

As in Nandigram, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, both as the Chief

Minister as well as the Police Minister failed to take quick action against the policemen who carried out atrocities which triggered off the series of events which led to the Lalgarh movement. It was possible for him to take exemplary action against the guilty policemen to restore confidence of the aggrieved people. However this he failed to do. From a situation that could have generated a sympathy wave for him following the assassination attempt he ended up as the villain who unleashed police atrocities and the Operation Green Hunt on the tribal population of Lalgarh. The dream of a steel plant and economic development went sour; guns took over the lives of a poverty stricken population.

It may also be worthwhile to see what were common and what the differences were between Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh. All three cases involved land acquisition to create capitalist industry through SEZs. In all three cases the police and the administration failed to manage the conflict that arose and carried out unnecessary violence. The issue of economic development through industrialisation became intertwined with, first, political rivalries between different political parties and, second, between local level bosses claiming allegiance to different political parties. In all three cases there were hints of an autonomous voice of the subaltern emerging but that voice became quickly subsumed under the control imposed by the political parties.

However, there were also significant differences. At Singur land was actually acquired even though there was resistance to it while because of the resistance land was not acquired at Nandigram. At Lalgarh on the other hand the acquisition of land did not cause any tension but the conflict started following the completely unnecessary atrocities carried out by the police. In case of Lalgarh we also have a clear and marked presence of the Maoists while their role in the other two cases is alleged but there is no clear evidence of it. Lalgarh was also different from the other two cases in the fact that here the tribal population was involved and it was the first major tribal revolt in West Bengal for a long time. Also at Lalgarh, the main grievance of the protestors were not against loss of land but against the humiliation that was meted out to them by the state authorities.

One aspect that was common to all three of course was the fact that the protests took place in rural Bengal although they had a significant impact on the urban psyche as well. The fourth major

upheaval however took place in the city of Kolkata involving a young man's mysterious death. To the story of Rizwanur Rahman we now turn.

Rizwanur Rahman's Death

On 21 September 2007, a young 30-year-old man was found dead on a railway track between Dum Dum and Bidhannagar stations of Kolkata with a wound at the back of his head[8]. His name was Rizwanur Rahman, a computer trainer at a multi-media training centre. His unfortunate death had all the juicy ingredients of a media sensation. He was a Muslim young man, married to a young Hindu girl, Priyanka Todi, who came from a rich industrialist family. Priyanka was one of his students at the computer training centre. Love blossomed between the two and on 18 August they secretly got married according to the Special Marriage Act. The family members of both sides were not informed and only a few friends attended as witness to the signature ceremony. After the marriage Priyanka went back to his parental home and life went on as usual for a few days.

A few days later, Rizwanur decided to break the news to his elder brother Rukbanur Rahman. Following this Rizwanur brought his wife home on August 31 without informing the father of the bride, Mr Ashok Todi. They wrote a letter to the police seeking protection from the possible threats from the Todi family.

What happened between 31 August and 21 September is a matter of legal dispute and therefore I would only present it as a story we could hear or read in the newspapers. The Todi family was shocked and did not like the fact that their daughter had got married to Rizwanur. This is not very uncommon when a marriage takes place that violates not only the class divide but also the communal divide. However what complicated the situation was the allegation that the Todi family used their class position to influence top level police officials of Kolkata to threaten the young couple. It is alleged that the police threatened Rizwanur that he would be charged with a case of abduction if he did not persuade his wife to return to her family (*Indian Express*, 7 October 2007). It is also alleged that as a result of this threat from the police Rizwanur decided to send Priyanka back to the Todis for a week. This was the informal

understanding between the police and Rizwanur. Needless to say, solving marital disputes where no law has been violated was not exactly what the police was supposed to do. They had other things such as catching criminals to take care of.

However Priyanka did not return to Rizwanur's home after one week. After a while Rizwanur was unable to talk to her on the phone either. On 19 September Rizwanur approached Association of People's Democratic Rights (APDR) a Civil Society Organisation working on human rights issues (*The Telegraph*, 23 September 2007). He wanted to explore legal options of getting his wife back and also registered the threats he had received. But that very morning his body was found on a railway track between Dumdum and Bidhan Nagar stations.

The matter received massive media attention and resulted in social outcry. The question was did Rizwanur commit suicide or was it a case of murder? Rizwanur's family alleged that he was murdered while the Police Commissioner described it as a 'simple case of suicide' even before the post mortem was completed. The Commissioner, Mr Prasun Mukherjee, became a target of scorn when he said that eloping even for adults was immoral and the police have always interfered in such matters. It also became clear through media investigations that some time back Prasun Mukherjee was elected as the President of Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) with support from Mr Ashok Todi.

An investigation by Kinsuk Basu of *The Telegraph* revealed within a week that the suicide argument was full of loop holes.[9] The body was placed on the tracks with head up while usually in case of a suicide on the railway track the body is seen face down. There was only one major injury behind the back of his head. The shirt was spotlessly clean according to eyewitnesses. Finally, the eyewitnesses said that the body was removed with unusual alacrity, within half-an-hour of the phone call, whereas railway police usually takes more than three hours to come to the spot.

What was unusual about the response to the incident was that there was a massive and spontaneous middle-class outcry against the incident. Candle-lights protests were organised outside any party banner and youths who perhaps belong to the 'apolitical' section of the society also participated in the movement for justice. In this sense the response was similar to the protests at Singur, Nandigram

and Lalgarh – the first reactions came from outside the political parties. New terms 'nagarik samaj', roughly meaning 'civil society' was floated to understand this segment which was protesting outside the party umbrella. The protests showed that there was a possibility of ordinary citizens protesting against something wrong.

However the course of the agitation also followed the pattern set by Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh—citizen's protests were quickly taken over by the political parties and TMC made the most out of it. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee once again took almost a month to take any action against the police officers. On 17 October, he said that all police officers whose names were involved in the case would be transferred with immediate effect. This announcement was made however only after the Kolkata High Court ordered a CBI investigation into the death. By this time TMC leader Mamata Banerjee had already met the family of Rizwanur and pledged all support to them. Brinda Karat pledged the support of her party to the family of Rizwanur in November[10] but she was late in doing so. By this time Rizwanur's family had turned towards TMC.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) finally described the case as suicide but charge-sheeted Priyanka's father Ashok Todi, her uncle Pradip Todi, maternal uncle Anil Saraogi, former deputy commissioner Ajay Kumar, ACP Sukanti Chakraborty, sub-inspector Krishnendu Das, and a person known as Pappu who allegedly acted as a link between the police and the Todis for abatement of suicide.

In another gory twist to the tale, on 11 February 2009, Arindam Manna, the railway police officer who initiated the investigation on the Rizwanur case was found dead on the railway tracks in Mankundu station of Hoogly district. He had injuries to his left eye, right leg and had a deep cut on the throat. He was a key witness in the CBI charge-sheet. There is no information as yet as to what caused his death.

The agitation around the death of Rizwanur Rahman came roughly at the same time when the incidents of Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh took place and therefore added fuel to the anti-CPI(M) fire that had been already ignited. It also added to the disenchantment of the Muslim community from the Left Front since the publication of the Sachar Committee Report[11] towards the end of 2006 which claimed that West Bengal is one of the worst states

to live in for Muslims with only 2.4 per cent of government officials being Muslim even though they form nearly 25 per cent of the population.

All these events of 2006 and 2007 caught the over confident CPI(M) state leadership off-guard. Suddenly the invincible machinery of the party seemed to be gasping for breath in the face of one challenge after the other which eroded its public support. Everything happened within a short span of time, a little too quickly for the party to understand, absorb and react. Unfortunately for the party more misfortune was in store. As if things were not bad enough in Bengal and while CPI(M) in West Bengal was desperately trying to salvage itself from the debacles of Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh, the agitation around the death of Rizwanur Rahman and the damaging claims of the Sachar Report, the party leaders in New Delhi took the suicidal decision in July 2008 to withdraw support from the UPA.

Withdrawal of Support from UPA 1

In the 2004 parliamentary elections, no single party won absolute majority to come to power on its own. This was in keeping with recent trend of coalition politics in India. Out of 543 seats, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 169 seats whereas Indian National Congress (INC) led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) won 222 seats. The Left Front achieved its best result so far with 59 seats. Clearly the Left Front was in a position to significantly influence national policy by supporting INC to form the government. A Common Minimum Programme was worked out; veteran leader and General Secretary of CPI(M) Harkishan Singh Surjeet played an important role in it and the CMP aimed to push the national policies towards a centre-left position. The Left Front chose not to join the Government but support it and influence its policies.

After assuming office there were several areas in which Manmohan Singh's government was pushed to follow a pro-poor policy. The most notable was the passing of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) which led to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). This Act for the first

time in the history of India gave a rural household the right to claim hundred days of unskilled employment from the government in a financial year. This was, at least on paper, different from the previous wage employment schemes of Government of India where the government decided to give employment through activities such as road building but the people of the country as such did not have any right to employment. Other important bills that were passed after the UPA came to power included the Right to Information Act (2005) and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005). While the Left parties were alone not responsible for these progressive legislations, they did support them and pushed the government to pass them. It was in general agreed that the Left parties were playing an important constructive role in the parliament and the fact that the Left MPs had a clean image as far as financial corruption was concerned helped to boost their standing at the national level. There was a debate as to whether the Left should have joined the government or not but nonetheless the overall image of the role of the Left Front in UPA 1 was good till 2008. The image was boosted by the performance of Mr Somnath Chatterjee as the Speaker of the house. The 2006 landslide victory of the Left in West Bengal further cemented the position of the Left Front in the country.

Meanwhile an important change took place within CPI(M). An older generation of pragmatic leaders such as Jyoti Basu and Harkishan Singh Surjeet gave way to a relatively younger generation of leaders. Prakash Karat became the General Secretary in 2005 in place of Harkishan Singh Surjeet. This was in tune with change of guard in West Bengal from Jyoti Basu to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee a few years earlier. This change, when it took place was welcomed and it showed that unlike many other parties in India which were ruled along family lines, CPI(M) was capable of choosing a new leadership through a democratic process. In 2006 all looked well – CPI(M) had a new leadership both at the Centre and at the state level, it had a significant number of seats in the Parliament, strong track record of land reform and panchayati raj, relatively clean MPs, and even the Speaker of the Lok Sabha came from the Party. The question was whether CPI(M)would be able to further increase its strength in the country in the coming years.

This rise of the parliamentary Left should not be seen in isolation

from a general rise of Left wing parties in the country, in the subcontinent and elsewhere. The non-parliamentary Left consisting mostly of the Communist Party of India (Maoists) had developed a significant presence in large parts of central India. Other Leftist parties such as CPI-ML also had their pockets of influence. In neighbouring Nepal a Left party also came to power in 2006 by overthrowing traditional monarchical rule. Latin America was undergoing a Left revival with more and more countries choosing a Leftist government of one type or the other.

At this historic juncture however the Left parties of India failed to seize the opportunity that came before them. Instead of fighting their common class-enemies revolutionary Left and the parliamentary Left Front chose to see each other as enemies and failed to develop even a minimum understanding. They remained trapped in a battle with each other trying to settle old scores rather than developing tolerance for different forms of Left movement as has happened in Latin America. This produced a disunited Left in India with the two sides spending their energies to kill each other and even joining hands with non-left forces to win their battles. The result of this short-sightedness was that by 2011 the parliamentary Left was reduced to insignificance and the revolutionary Left was battling for survival against sustained para-military action.

Second, within CPI(M) there was a division between how the central leadership in Delhi saw the role of the party and how West Bengal unit sought to progress. While Delhi wanted to follow an ant-imperialist/anti-market reform policy, the Bengal unit preferred to be more open towards capitalism and invite capitalists to set up factories in the state. The duality perhaps sprang from two different compulsions – the central leadership wanted to critique the national pro-market policy while the state leadership had to find a way to industrialise within a pro-market neo-liberal regime by competing with other states in attracting investment.

Thus, following its own ideological position, Prakash Karat's central leadership found it impossible to continue with UPA when Government of India decided to sign the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008, better known as 123 Agreement. For the Delhi leadership of CPI(M) the treaty amounted to a sell-out to American imperialism. The technicalities of the treaty were extremely complicated and there was no clear public opinion on this. What

became most controversial and brought out the division between Bengal and Delhi in sharp focus was the decision to withdraw support from the government, thereby plunging the government towards a vote of confidence. The Bengal unit was at that point in time trying to recover from the wave of anti-incumbency that was generated by events at Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh and the case of Rizwanur Rahman's death; its best hope lay in keeping the opposition disunited and therefore the alliance with Congress was vital. This was also important in view of the fact that the largest number of MPs for the CPI(M) came from Bengal and the parliamentary election was only a year away. If the alliance with Congress fell then it was likely to create the opportunity for TMC to bridge the gap with Congress and go to the election with a combined opposition. While the rumour of Left's withdrawal was going around since 2007 as the discussions between US and India was progressing, Biman Basu, Chairman of Bengal's Left Front ruled out any such possibility in a public statement where he said, 'it is gossip and seems to have no real basis'.[12] He was perhaps unaware of how the party leadership was thinking or was himself indulging in wishful thinking. A few months later in the report on the 19th Party Congress held at Coimbatore in April 2008 it was said that: 'The CPI(M) will firmly oppose India becoming a subordinate strategic ally of the United States and thereby contribute to the strengthening of the worldwide anti-imperialist struggle,'[13] but did not say that support would be withdrawn from UPA1. But while the chief architect of the Common Minimum Programme, Harkishan Singh Surjeet was in his death-bed, on 9 July 2008, CPI(M) issued a press statement in which it said that the Manmohan Singh Government has violated the Common Minimum Programme and the 'nuclear deal… is anchored in a US law, the Hyde Act, [therefore] it will hamper an independent foreign policy and restrict our strategic autonomy.'[14] The statement also blamed the UPA for not universalising the Public Distribution System, not stopping forward trading on essential commodities, curb hoarding and speculators, etc. It accused the UPA government of following the same neo-liberal policies that the previous BJP government followed and said hence support to the government is being withdrawn.

While the decision to oppose the pro-US foreign policy of Manmohan Singh and the other criticisms made of Congress

government was ideologically correct, the decision to withdraw support was a political mistake. It was a mistake on several counts. First, if the Congress-led government would have fallen then BJP would have made the maximum benefit, not CPI(M). Second, there was a strong public opinion in favour of a government lasting its full term. But most importantly, CPI(M) was not hundred percent sure that it would be able to pull off the vote of no-confidence. In the end Congress survived although through means that are being debated. To add to Karat's embarrassment he had to face rebellion from Somnath Chatterjee, the Speaker of the House and important leader of CPI(M). Chatterjee was expelled from the party, a decision that reflected the inner conflicts within the party rather than its disciplinary strength as the same Somnath Chatterjee was later invited to campaign for CPI(M) in the Assembly election in West Bengal.

Once it failed to pull off the no-confidence motion, CPI(M) made, to my mind, an even bigger mistake by trying to forge a 'third front' in the next parliamentary elections (2009) with parties with whom it had nothing in common ideologically. This extraordinary act of pragmatism was clearly inconsistent with the ideologically inspired decision to withdraw support from UPA 1. How could CPI(M) find an ally in a party like Telegu Desam and at the same time withdraw support from Congress for pursuing neo-liberalism? If Left Front would have gone for the elections on its own without trying to forge any kind of alliance with other non-Left pro-capitalism political parties then at least one could have said that its decision to withdraw support was provoked by pure idealism, and not egoism, and it was willing to sacrifice power for the sake of its ideology.

What happened after the desperate attempt to create a 'third front' was that Left Front lost the credibility that it was able to earlier establish as a moderate Left-of-centre party on the national scene. I doubt how many members in 2008 saw CPI(M) as a 'communist' party fighting to usher in a Bolshevik style revolution. On the other hand the party was valued in the national scene as a Left-of-centre secular party with very few corrupt politicians which is a good antidote to extreme pro-market policies of Congress and BJP's communalism but which was also not dogmatically opposed to market as such. This is a role that perhaps CPI(M) could have continued to play successfully till 2009 and then take a call as to

whether it would continue with Congress or not. As it was formally not a part of the UPA Cabinet, withdrawing support was also not necessary to protect its Leftist credentials. A wiser politician than Prakash Karat perhaps would have launched a fierce protest against the Civil Nuclear deal but continued to support the Government till 2009.

In the end no damage was done to United States and INC but in the next Lok Sabha Elections the Left Front lost 35 seats and was reduced to a position of almost irrelevance in the Parliament, with a total of 24 seats. Karat's own party was the biggest loser with a loss of 27 seats, mostly from Bengal. Were these mistakes a result of political immaturity? I think so. In a statement in 2011, veteran CPI leader A.B. Bardhan said, 'While withdrawal of support was imminent and inevitable, it should have happened earlier and not just a few months before elections... Support should have been withdrawn over some people's issue'.[15] However in 2008 he was not able to stop Left Front from taking the plunge towards disaster.

CPI(M)'s self-destruction was thus almost complete. The violence and incompetence of the police at Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh and in the Rizwanur case had sparked off an anti-CPI(M) wave that was unimaginable in 2006. Important intellectuals of Kolkata such as Mahasweta Devi and Kabir Suman had made the support for Mamata Banerjee clear and a new slogan "*Paribartan Chai*" (we want change) was in the air. They had realised that only Mamata Banerjee had the mass appeal that could dislodge Left Front from power. A relentless media campaign by privately owned television channels had badly damaged the pro-poor image that Left Front had built over the years. Stories of human rights violations by CPI(M) which happened long back such as that of Marichjhapi were being rekindled.[16]. In addition to all this the decision of CPI(M) central leadership to withdraw support from UPA made the electoral calculations easier by allowing TMC and Congress, bitter rivals otherwise, to join hands. Even in best of times Left Front managed to win regularly because the opposition vote remained divided but now that the opposition decided to go for an alliance, its chances of winning became slim. It is debatable as to whether CPI(M) would have lost power if support would not have been withdrawn but there cannot be any doubt that the decision helped the opposition rather than CPI(M). As was expected, after several rounds of

negotiations, on 11 March 2009, Congress and TMC announced an electoral alliance for the Lok Sabha Elections of 2009.[17]

The Resurrection of Mamata Banerjee

Mamata Banerjee comes from a lower-middle class but upper-caste family of Kolkata.[18] Her political career began with the West Bengal branch of the Indira Congress as a youth leader. She became the General Secretary of the Mahila Congress (I) in 1976 and remained in that post till 1980. In 1984, she tasted her first major political victory when she defeated Left leader Somnath Chatterjee in the Jadavpur constituency of Kolkata in the Lok Sabha election following Indira Gandhi's assassination which saw a pro-Congress wave in the country which brought Rajiv Gandhi to power. However she lost in 1989 Lok Sabha election, but again won in 1991 after the V.P. Singh government fell, this time from Calcutta South. She retained this seat between 1991 and 2009. In 1991, she became the Union Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Youth and Sports and Women and Child Development. In 1998 she left Congress and formed her own party AITMC and became an ally of the BJP in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). In 2000 she presented her first railway budget as the Union Minister for Railways. She left that alliance in 2001 and allied with Congress and in 2004 became the Union Minister of Coal and Mines and again the Union Minister for Railways in 2009.

Her party, TMC, which emerged as a Bengali regionalist party had limited success till 2009. In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, TMC won seven seats. It increased the tally to eight in the Lok Sabha by-elections in 1999. In 2000 TMC won the Kolkata Municipal Corporation election for the first time, thereby signaling a shift of the anti-CPI(M) vote of Kolkata from Congress to TMC. In the 2001 Assembly elections, TMC won 60 seats. However the fortunes of TMC began to fall in the next Lok Sabha Election in 2004 when it won only one seat, that of Mamata Banerjee. In the 2005 Kolkata Municipal elections, TMC lost to the Left Front and again in the Assembly election of 2006 it won only 30 seats.

Thus, till 2006 Mamata Banerjee had established herself as a popular leader of the anti-Left Front camp but her party had mixed fortunes with not much to show. It was her good fortune that during

this time neither BJP nor Congress was able to perform well and therefore she remained the most important anti-Left Front leader. There were charismatic Congress leaders such as Adhir Chaudhuri in Murshidabad but no one who could appeal to the anti-CPI(M) electorate as a whole more than she could. But perhaps more importantly, she was able to acquire a reputation as a fearless enemy of CPI(M) who would never bow down to any pressure from the Party. In course of time she acquired a particular style of melodrama of being under attack from CPI(M) that made an emotional connect with the masses perhaps in the same way that folk dramas (*jatra*s) and popular Bengali cinema did (see chapter 6). She deliberately chose to wear a white sari and *hawai chappals* and live in her lower middle-class ancestral home to prove her ordinary background. So 'Momota' or 'Didi' was definitely a household name by 2006, and the most important mass leader of the anti-CPI(M) electorate, which was never small in percentage but remained divided between Congress and TMC.

Apart from building a new party Banerjee had a particular problem that was perhaps unique to West Bengal. She was popular but was never really taken seriously the same way popular Bengali films sell but do not have respectability. Her many acts of melodrama on the streets and in the Parliament were reported but laughed at in the respectable society of Bengal and helped the Left Front to project her as a mercurial and unreliable person and the fact that her party did not have any definite ideology was also useful in portraying her as an intellectually confused person. As a counter to this belief she tried to gain respectability by writing several books and even claimed to be a painter but such display of intellectual prowess did not have many takers. During this period Mamata Banerjee and TMC received very little academic attention also, except for one article by Dwaipayan Bhattarchayya in *Economic and Political Weekly*.[19] Bhattacharyya commented:

> One of the greatest paradoxes of the policies of the TMC is that the party always took pain to prove that it is not lured by the positions of authority and can readily sacrifice such positions to protect the interests of West Bengal, or the poor, or the victims of CPI(M)'s 'atrocities' yet it never dithered in its attempt to invoke the strong (and undemocratic) arm of central authority at the slightest pretext. In other words, the party wobbled uneasily between its short and long term objectives, between its intent to project itself as a part with a difference and its repeated submission to the run-of-the-mill description of a political party steeped in the calculus material benefits, blackmailing, arm twisting and of course, corruption. (pp.1533–34).

He also pointed out that unlike Mayawati in UP for example Banerjee did not have a stable section of population as her party-base. He further commented very rightly that:

> Whenever she stood by the urban toiler, the illegal slum-dwellers, the displaced population or even the rural poor, her voice… appears as a sporadic, unconvincing and, ultimately, driven by the urge to buy quick attention…. The TMC therefore failed to translate its electoral promises into a social presence which could have been its only guarantee against a premature demise. (p.1537)

However, since the humiliating defeat in 2006 there was a crucial change in her moves. She managed to make astute political moves and grab all the opportunities that came her way. The first crucial step was to de-link from BJP. Then she joined the agitations at Singur and Nandigram and managed to win over a group of influential intellectuals of Kolkata who were anti-CPI(M) because of various reasons but not pro-Congress or BJP. Of these I think the three most important persons were Mahasweta Devi, Debabrata Bandyopadhyay and Kabir Suman. There were others like painter Suvaprasanna and Jogen Chaudhuri, theatre personalities Shaoli Mitra and Bratya Basu and singer Pratul Mukhopadhyay. Kabir Suman, in his memoir *Nishaner Naam Tapashi Malik*[20] has given a detailed account of how he became a political ally of Mamata when she was fasting against the land acquisition at Singur. There was of course a political/ideological/intellectual alliance but in Suman's memoir one also gets the feeling that Mamata could actually become like a younger sister to him, referring to him as 'Kabir-*da*' in a very Bengali idiom, talking to him not about big issues but looking after small things like ensuring that he always got his cup of tea or could smoke his cigarette. I remember listening to Mahasweta Devi once on TV before Mamata Banerjee came to power and she also said

that she found in Mamata a warm human being who would listen to her and develop a genuine emotional connect. Mamata was for many a refreshing change to ideological talk and mechanical party discipline of CPI(M) which deliberately cultivated a faceless image. While CPI(M) followed the traditional method of projecting party discipline as its strength where individuals do not matter, Mamata Banerjee deliberately developed the opposite image of a Bengali 'didi' who talks in common man's improper Bengali but pays respect to seniors, even Jyoti Basu who once threw her out of Writers' Buildings.

Second, Mamata Banerjee was able to build a team around her. Thus on issues related to land she had Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, one of the important architects of land reform. To talk to the English language media she had Derek O'Brien, whose skills in front of the camera could hardly be matched by anyone in the Bengal CPI(M). For organisational issues she relied on Mukul Roy, who did a good job. She also showed flexibility in incorporating erstwhile Congress leaders like Subrata Mukherjee and Somen Mitra.

Third, she understood the importance of the electronic media long before CPI(M) leaders did. While it is possible that the private capital in the media boosted her to pursue a deliberate anti-Left agenda, it is equally true that she was more accessible to the ordinary reporter than her CPI(M) counterparts.

Similarly, she realised the significance of speed in taking action as soon as a situation developed and reaching the field before anyone from the opposition could. A good example is the way she won over Rizwanur Rahman's family and even made Rukbanur, elder brother of Rizwanur, a MLA from her party.

Fifth, she understood the strong undercurrent of Bengali regionalism in contemporary Bengal. Thus, after becoming the Railway Minister of India she proved herself to be a disaster for the country,[21] but won the hearts of the Bengalis by showing open partiality towards Bengal and even staying in Kolkata most of the time.

Crucially, between 2006 and 2008 she found for her party an ideology and a class-base that was lacking earlier. The ideology was one of Bengali nationalism, reflected in the name of the party organ *Jaago Bangla* (arise Bengal) and her class base became the peasantry afraid of losing their land. But she also carefully avoided

an extreme Left position that would be too scary for the industrial lobby and those who wanted to see industrialisation in Bengal.

Finally, she showed political maturity when she agreed to form an alliance with Congress for the Lok Sabha elections. Once the Lok Sabha election was won, she was able to establish herself as a potential Chief Minister of Bengal.

Once these steps in the right direction were made, other things fell on her side. Most of the newspapers and channels who were anti-CPI(M) saw in her the chance to topple CPI(M) and therefore went out of the way in projecting her. More and more media persons, intellectuals and academicians came to join her as she looked like the winning candidate. *The Telegraph* even carried an article by Shobha De who pondered over the question as to whether Mamata is sexy or not and finally gave the verdict that she is certainly sexier than Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee .[22]

The hype around Mamata Banerjee had a dimension that could not be grasped through any narrative of events or any empirical sociological study. Somewhere deep within the Bengali collective psyche there was a fundamental transformation, at least among a significant section of the population to dramatically change the electoral landscape of Bengal. A significant portion of the Bengali society had become post-ideological and was no more interested in complex theoretical statements that are so characteristic of Marxism or any other intellectually charged ideology. This was a time when no ideology as such was able to show a clear road ahead. Hence in this ideological vacuum what seemed to be appealing was a belief in the power of democracy to throw out a ruling party. Instead of high culture, intellectualism and regimentation of Left Front a significant section seems to have preferred the non-intellectual emotional melodrama of Mamata Banerjee and rallied around the deliberately vague slogan of '*Paribartan Chai*' even if the nature of change in future was uncertain.

My own position around this time was that I was happy to see that the arrogance of CPI(M) being challenged although I didn't support TMC. But what I wanted to see, though it was wishful thinking, was a strong civil society in Bengal which is capable of raising questions before the political parties rather than a simple swing from the hegemony of one party to another. In a thought provoking open letter published in *Mainstream*, Sumanta Banerjee

had raised the question as to whether in trying to dislodge CPI(M) intellectuals like Mahasweta Devi *et al.* were doing the right thing by supporting Mamata Banerjee.[23] In his reply Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri wrote that although Mamata Banerjee is not expected to achieve something radically better, nonetheless, 'A CPI(M) defeat will raise the spirits of the people and strengthen the movement for democracy. As the new rulers start falling into the ruts of class rule, people will learn that storming the state is much more than changing a government, but that is a different narrative'.[24] I replied to this and said:

> The idea that firstly the CPI(M) has to be removed and then only everything else will follow is a dangerous line to take. Why not start building a civil society movement even before the elections are decided? Instead of focusing on strengthening the civil society movement which had sprung up during Singur, Nandigram and the unfortunate death of Rizwanur Rahman, the intellectuals have ended up strengthening the TMC as they believe that only if the TMC wins and the CPI(M) loses that West Bengal can hope to have a better future. The answer is clearly no. The future of West Bengal will depend on how far the people of West Bengal are able to push their government (whichever be the party in power) towards better governance.[25]

My position was, of course, a marginal one. As far as the election was concerned, I preferred to stay away, did not vote, and watch on television from Delhi the euphoric moment for TMC when it achieved the impossible on 13 May 2011. The result was not unexpected but I was surprised and unhappy by the scale of victory. But Bengal seemed to prefer one dominant party in power rather than a strong opposition.

Lokniti Post-poll Survey

The electoral defeat of the Left Front resulted in many polemical discussions, some of which I shall discuss in the concluding chapter of the book. However there was one data-based analysis of voter behaviour and I take note of that in this last section of this chapter. New Delhi-based Centre for Developing Societies' Lokni Network

carried out a post-poll survey, the result of which was published in *Economic and Political Weekly*.[26] The main findings of the survey may be summed up as follows:

- Left lost heavily in semi-urban and urban constituencies. In the 52 urban constituencies, Left lost all seats; in the semi-urban constituencies the difference was 11 per cent in vote share. In the greater Kolkata region Left Front (LF) lost 65 out of 66 seats.
- LF lost heavily in the young voter category, TMC+[27] had a lead of 21 per cent in the age group of 18–25.
- LF lost 7 per cent rural votes and 16 per cent urban votes.
- LF lost heavily among upper castes and OBCs; Brahmins 17 per cent; Kayasthas 14 per cent; OBCs 14 per cent.
- LF lost heavily among educated sections – upto secondary education – 11 per cent; more than secondary – 16 per cent lead for TMC+.
- Among salaried professionals LF lost 19 per cent and among business classes LF lost 12 per cent.
- Left did relatively better in the SC/ST reserved seats category. TMC+ had a lead of 3–4 per cent compared to 9 per cent in general seats.
- In constituencies with 30 per cent or more adivasi voters LF did well, LF enjoyed a lead of 8 per cent over TMC+.
- In constituencies with high Muslim concentration, the LF didn't do very badly, TMC+ had a lead of only 3 per cent.
- Marginal farmers and share croppers continued their support for LF. LF took a small lead over TMC+ in this category.

The survey also asked its respondents certain questions to understand what why voting behaviour changed. The survey asked its respondents to assess the performance of the Left Front government in terms of certain public good delivered by the government – road, water, education, health and law and order. 75 per cent of the respondents said that roads have improved, 66 per cent said that supply of electricity has improved, 59 per cent said that supply of drinking water has improved and 61 per cent said that quality of education has improved. Thus in the eyes of the

respondents there was little to complain in terms of development indicators. The response on health service was not good—only 46 per cent said that things have improved. The worst indicator however was law and order where only 45 per cent said that things have improved as against 61 per cent in 2006.

The respondents were also asked whether they knew of certain issues like Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh, etc., and what they thought of the handling of these issues, the response is revealing. In all cases the respondents felt that the state government failed to handle the issue well.

When asked about perception on CPI(M) the majority of the respondents felt that there was lot of corruption within the party (Agree = 57 per cent; Disagree = 21 per cent).

The survey pointed out that in the age group of up to 25 years the Left did very badly, coming down from 56 per cent in 2006 to 37 per cent in 2011. It also lost heavily among post graduates and professionals, coming down from 54 per cent in 2006 to 27 per cent in 2011.

The fact that the Left lost heavily in greater Kolkata, among the youth and among educated professionals show that the urban intelligentsia and the media played an important role in determining the future of the election. This was in a way a most ironic twist to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's dreams as his industrial policy was aimed precisely at winning over these voters.

Most analysts have also somewhat underestimated a fairly obvious factor—the fact that after many years Congress and TMC became allies and arrived at an electoral understanding. Left Front's electoral success in the past crucially depended on keeping its own Front united and keeping its opposition divided. In late nineties the situation became better because of Mamata Banerjee's decision to break-away from INC. If one calculates the combined opposition votes in the previous elections one would see that Left Front had only a narrow margin but it did not reflect in terms of seats as the opposition was divided.

Two other factors played their role in ensuring that the suicidal mistakes of Singur and Nandigram could not be reversed even though the election was nearly three years away. The first was the fact that LF lost the media battle. The electronic media, especially, was much better used by the opposition than LF and the media

clearly had an impact on educated sections of the society although we cannot judge exactly how many votes were swung by the electronic and print media. The other factor was that Bhattacharrjee's own party failed to showcase any major achievement in the social sector and/or vigorously defend its industrial policy. As a result when the final electoral battle came the campaign degenerated into histrionics of leaders like Gautam Deb as CPI(M) could not show what it had delivered over the last five years. If major achievements were made in the social sector—health, education, rural employment, etc.—then there was a chance of fighting back, but that was not possible. Negative campaigns against Mamata Banerjee or recollection of an earlier era of land reform, etc., was not good enough to pull the votes of a population that was increasingly restless for change. Nor was the party able to show that it had taken exemplary action against party members who had indulged in corrupt practices and hooliganism.

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8

Reflections on the 'Decline' of the Left

Following the Assembly elections of 2011, as the new TMC Government took charge amidst massive popular enthusiasm; there were quite a few important articles published in the print media which debated the current status, causes of downfall and future prospects of the Left in India. I kept reading them and collecting them trying to find my own position. These reflections capture the multiple perspectives that operated within the Left in India during this time and therefore have relevance beyond the post-mortem of the electoral defeat. The discussions that took place in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the Left Front in the 2011 Assembly elections followed three interlinked threads, which may be separated for the purpose of clearer analysis: (a) Why did the Left Front lose in the 2011 election?; (b) Why is the Left declining in West Bengal and India?; and (c) What does the Left need to do in order to revive itself? More often than not the discussions flowed along all three lines, but for the sake of analytical clarity, I shall take them up separately. We begin with the arguments made specific to the electoral defeat.

Why Did the Left Lose the Election of 2011?

In a lecture and an article immediately after the defeat erstwhile Finance Minister of the Left Front, Shri Ashok Mitra made a severe critique of CPI(M). He said that 'The Left Front government had tried to do its best for the general welfare of the people. But the prolonged rule of 34 years saw the organisation getting infected by termites. Corruption, haughtiness, arrogance, high-handedness… all these invaded the organisation,'.[1] In another article, Mitra argued that over the years LF in West Bengal had acquired a belief that it

was invincible. This false perception resulted in sloth—both at the level of theory as well as at the level of praxis. The 2006 electoral victory was misinterpreted by the party as a mandate for neo-liberal industrialisation. In the rush for industrialization, tycoons were invited and land was acquired without consulting the people through participatory bodies such as the panchayats. The self-perception of invincibility led to, 'The conviction that their party was, and would always be, supreme in the neighbourhood fostered both hauteur and superciliousness, which in turn ushered in cronyism coupled with sycophancy'.[2]

A similar analysis, although less harsh in some respects, was made by pro-CPI(M) intellectual Prabhat Patnaik. He argued in an essay in *Economic and Political Weekly* that the 'Left', by which he largely refers to the CPI(M), has followed a policy of 'pursuit of political practice that is uninformed by the project of transcending capitalism'.[3] He coined the term 'empiricisation' to describe this phenomenon. Empiricisation, according to him leads to certain closely related effects—it leads to bossism at the local level where politics becomes a career rather than a revolutionary practice; second, it generates a tendency to adjust to the existing situation rather to carry forward the revolutionary agenda; third, this process leads to alienation of the party from the 'basic classes' it is supposed to represent and finally empiricisation leads to even more empiricisation and which leads to hegemonisation of the party by the logic of neo-liberal capitalism. This is what, at least to some extent, he felt happened to the party in West Bengal resulting in its eventual fall in the election. In other words, CPI(M)'s fall, is not just in terms of electoral defeat, but also in terms of deviation from its basic anti-imperialist struggle.

Dipankar Bhattacharya, General Secretary of Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) had a roughly similar diagnosis: 'The CPI(M) has not gone down in West Bengal resisting the LPG policies, it has just paid the price for daring to implement those policies by trampling upon the rights and interests of the rural poor and the labouring peasantry'.[4] The turn towards capitalist industrialisation ('neo-liberalism' being the pejorative jargon) was blamed for the defeat of the LF by an editorial in *Economic and Political Weekly* as well. The editorial argued that 'LF's electoral defeat reflects the public's rejection of the CPI(M)'s promotion of the "primitive

accumulation" of capital – for instance in the conversion of agricultural land to real estate through coercion, benefiting capital.'[5]

Kheya Bag, in an article published in *New Left Review*, took a more long-term historical perspective of the fall, although she also identified the pro-capitalist turn as an important milestone.[6] She argued that during the license raj, West Bengal suffered from discrimination by the Centre. As a result industrialisation was not possible although significant gains were made in the rural areas due to land reform, panchayati raj and green revolution. However, once the license raj was removed LF tried to follow the neo-liberal model of building special economic zones rather to try to resurrect the industrial areas that had declined. In pursuit of the neo-liberal model the LF eventually ended up unleashing violence on the poor which was capitalised on by Mamata Banerjee and her allies. The discontent against local party leaders, who were known for their corruption and highhandedness, was successfully transformed into a state-wide agitation for change by the opposition.

Amitava Mukherjee in an article in *Mainstream* also highlighted some of the long term issues that he thought has resulted in LF defeat apart from the more immediate issues of Singur and Nandigram. He argued that failure to extend irrigation in the rural areas has meant that 'agriculture has now become a domain of the rural rich who can arrange shallow tubewell-based minor irrigation. As a result huge areas remain uncultivated and large scale pauperisation of small and marginal farmers has taken place.' Similarly, the absence of good infrastructure meant that companies like the TATAs would seek land closer to Kolkata where land is relatively more fertile. This resulted in the crisis of land acquisition that followed.[7]

Barun Dasgupta, in another article published in *Mainstream* said that by the time the CPI(M) lost it was neither a 'Communist nor Marxist but an out and out fascist party' and its Fascist/Stalinist method of operating has resulted in its downfall.[8] Roughly similar argument was made by Sumanta Banerjee in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Arguing that Singur and Nandigram were like the last straw in the camel's back, Banerjee said that 'The CPI(M) has paid the price for its unpardonable crimes and misdeeds while heading a Left-coalition government during the past three decades.'[9]

Aditya Nigam, in his analysis, tried to establish a link between

the long term cause and the short term cause of Left Front defeat. He argued that while there was always a resentment against the 'oppressive presence' of CPI(M)'s party machinery in the long term a certain inertia kept things going in favour of the Left till the breaking point came with Singur and Nandigram. Prior to this the dream of industrialisation remained a slogan was an abstract one till 2006 it helped CPI(M) to win new support and retain the old one. However Singur and Nandigram opened the eyes of the peasantry and 'soon the reality of "industrialization" revealed its vicious face and the scenario changed.'[10]

CPI(M)'s own official assessment of the defeat, as was adopted by the Central Committee at its 11–12 June 2011 meeting accepted a heavy defeat for the party in the state and acknowledged that 'prolonged rule of the Left Front government for 34 years have led to accumulation of several negative factors which have impelled the people to vote for change'. Such negative factors included failure to implement social welfare measures such as the public distribution system, health services, education, rural electrification etc. The Singur and Nandigram episodes were described as 'mistakes' which proved costly and helped the opposition. There were organisational failures as well, the review admitted. However the review also highlighted that there was a concerted effort by ruling classes and imperialism to weaken the CPI(M) and the Left. It also highlighted that nearly 41 per cent of the voters voted for Left Front even though the opposition managed to win a sweeping majority.[11]

'Decline' of the Left in India

The discussions on the decline of the Left in India was precipitated by the electoral defeat or the immanent electoral defeat of the Left Front in West Bengal but had a larger scope than the specific discussions on the electoral defeat of the Left Front in West Bengal. One important difference between the two discussions was that the discussions on the decline of the Left in India included a discussion of the Maoist movement as well and tried to understand the decline in terms of certain deeper, long term trends. For the sake of analysis I shall discuss the opinions related to parliamentary Left first and then move on to analyse the discussions on the Maoist Left.

Prabhat Patnaik, in the essay 'Left in Decline' mentioned above, identified the process of 'empiricisation' as the root cause of the gradual decline of the parliamentary Left, something that eventually led to the defeat in the 2011 elections as well.[12] He argued that one of the ways in which empiricisation takes place is when a movement reaches a plateau and it fails to grow further. This is what happened to the Left Front. Typically under such circumstances there is a strong tendency to consolidate what it already had and this in itself led to further stagnation. In order to consolidate its position, especially vis-à-vis the middle-class, CPI(M) embarked on a policy of capitalist industrialisation but this in turn meant that it was not be able to grow elsewhere in the country as it was no more in a position to take up peasant struggles as its agenda. Incidents such as Singur meant that the party no more had the credibility to fight for land alienation of the peasantry elsewhere in the country.

According to Patnaik, another important cause of empiricisation of the Left Front was that after the fall of the Soviet Union, it took to party-based capitalism of China as a model. As a result it was not able to oppose the development model of China from a socialist perspective and succumbed to the idea of inviting corporate capital for the sake of industrialisation. He identified the influence of the Chinese model as the 'most potent factor behind empiricisation of the party'. The faith shown in the Chinese model resulted in the popularity of the 'stagist theory' of history which claimed that first we must have capitalism and only then India would evolve into a socialist society. Unfortunately this 'stagist theory' was a mistake. The stagist theory presumed that 'at some point the very same party which presides over the suppression of the basic classes will suddenly and mysteriously start doing the exact opposite, and that the basic classes will follow it in either case'. This he described as 'absurd'.

Hiren Gohain, in a response to Patnaik, traced the decline of the Left Front in its decision to follow the parliamentary route of politics. He argued against the view expressed by Patnaik that there is nothing wrong per se in following the parliamentary route.[13] On the contrary, according to him, 'a particular non-revolutionary approach to parliamentary democracy in India today has led to both ideological dilution and practical impotence'.[14] As a result of following the parliamentary route there has been 'large-scale infiltration of opportunist middle-class elements in the party ranks'.[15] This has

also, according to him, resulted in a change in the class-character of the party, making it indistinguishable from any other party in India. An editorial published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* also blamed the parliamentary Left for deviating from its 1964 party programme and asked:

> Going by the CPI(M)'s 1964 programme, did the conduct of the party and the government it headed for 34 years in West Bengal promote the maturing of the conditions for the "people's democratic revolution" (PDR), the party's immediate goal? Did LF governance bring the desired "immediate relief to the people" in the last decade of that period of governance? Did it "strengthen the mass movement" as the party's programme thought it would? Did it "educate the people on the need for replacing the present bourgeois-landlord state and government headed by the big bourgeoisie"?[16]

A similar opinion was voiced by Achin Vanaik in an article in *New Left Review*. He argued that the erstwhile Communist Party has been 'co-opted into the liberal-democratic system of electoral and parliamentary politics. The parliamentary path, according to him, has 'corrupted them [parliamentary Left] programmatically, bureaucratically, socially and morally.'[17] Aditya Nigam also echoed a similar view in an article in *Mainstream Weekly*. He said:

> In both West Bengal and Kerala it [CPI(M)] is vying with other parties to be the champion of a neo-liberal model of development, undoing all the gains that it had itself pioneered for the rural and urban poor at one time. Whatever its rhetoric, its political practice today makes it indistinguishable from any other party, as a party that hobnobs with the rich, with corporate capital, in order to bargain away the interests of the poor.[18]

Sumanta Banerjee, in an article that preceded the final electoral defeat, pointed out that Left Front in West Bengal had failed to create 'a model of clean administration and a slightly better lot for the underprivileged poor there – albeit a little short of their ultimate revolutionary goal of a total socio-economic change' even though they were in power for more than three decades.[19] In other words, the parliamentary Left had the opportunity to create an example of a welfare state and thereby increase its prospects to woo voters in

other states. This they failed to do and therefore the Left declined. Banerjee has blamed unimaginative leadership at the state and at the party headquarters for the decline of the party:

> A fish begins to rot from its head. It is the party's head – the central leadership – that had begun to putrefy for quite some time. Signs of muddle-headedness were evident on the national scene, when the Prakash Karat-Sitaram Yechuri-led CPI(M) central committee underestimated the widespread public discontent with its governance in West Bengal and Kerala, and overestimated the importance of the nuclear deal as a major threat in the public mind that they thought would turn the voters against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance(UPA) in the 2009 election.[20]

Anil Rajimwale, a CPI leader, pointed out a somewhat different dimension.[21] According to him the Left in West Bengal and India has 'missed the reality of the growing middle class, which is an important growing factor in the Indian society. According to him, the Left was 'cut-off, not just practically, but theoretically' from this new phenomenon in Indian society. According to him, Bengal should have become an example of modern development and should have shown the way to rest of India. It could have shown how to build the public sector including in consumer goods and supermarket-chains.'[22] This the Left did not do and as a result West Bengal became one of the backward states. Instead of building the most modern transport system for rest of the country to emulate, Kolkata after 34 years of Left rule still had hand-drawn rickshaws, and the transport system was allowed to rot and then handed over to the private sector. In other words, for Rajimwale, the reason behind the decline of the Left lies in its failure to build a modern public sector led industrialisation, that could have been an example before rest of the country.

What Rajimwale seems to be pointing towards is a certain kind of ossification at the level of thinking in the context of a changing India. Pranab Bardhan has also echoed a similar position, although his argument is not only related to the middle class.[23] He lamented:

> In the context of a fast-changing world, their [parliamentary Left's] policy pronouncements continue to be obsolete formulae-driven and marked by chanting of catechisms: Market bad, State

> good; public sector good, private bad; leftist unions even when they act in reactionary, anti-poor and high-handed ways have to be defended; in foreign policy, America bad, China, Russia good (even when the latter countries now dis-play rampant oligarchic, crony capitalism), even the theocratic-authoritarian regime in Iran has to be supported because it fights the evil American empire, and so on.[24]

This intellectual ossification is, according to Bardhan, reflected in the 'hypocrisy' related to the market. While the central leadership describes market reform as neo-liberal and initiated under pressure from imperialist forces, the state governments followed the same pro-market capitalist path. Echoing other commentators he also argued that the Left Front failed to address the problems of poverty in West Bengal as well as it perhaps could have, thereby unable to set an example and said that unlike communist governments in most other parts of the world the Left Front failed to deliver basic education and health to its citizens. In the all-India context an important failure, according to him, has been the inability to organise the informal sector. Finally he castigated the Left for creating a local level 'mafia' in the name of Marxism which interfered in every aspect of people's lives.

In a two-part article in Bengali newspaper *Ei Samay*, Partha Chatterjee argued that the Left in India failed to respond creatively to the changes brought about by the liberalisation process initiated in 1991. Liberalisation led to decrease in the importance of the state owned economic enterprises and also led to informalisation of the labour economy. In the rural sector also the big landlords and jotdars, the traditional class enemy of the Left, has all but disappeared and more and more people have joined the non-farm sector of the rural economy. In states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, regional parties have taken better advantage of the caste and regional identities to win in elections. The Left has failed to come up with a viable alternative to these challenges.[25]

Thus we can perhaps discern, broadly speaking, three arguments: (a) the parliamentary Left has deviated from its core ideological principles and succumbed to bourgeois ideology; (b) there is the opposite argument that it has not changed enough with the times and therefore become redundant; and (c) it has failed to create a

successful model, especially in West Bengal, for it to showcase to rest of India and therefore lost its all-India appeal.

The Debate on the Maoist Left

Arundhati Roy and Gautam Navlakha have been optimistic about the future of the Maoist movement. In an essay in *Economic and Political Weekly* based on a field visit to Maoist operation areas, Navlakha said:

> I am convinced that this is one rebellion which will test the resilience of the Indian state as never before. Precisely because it is a rebellion in which people are fighting to save their land, forests, water and minerals from being grabbed and they are convinced that they have an alternative vision.[26]

Similarly Arundhati Roy, wrote a long essay in *Outlook*, in which she profusely praised the Maoists for challenging the Indian state and in her narrative there is hardly any discussion of decline of the Maoist movement. Roy said on the alternative model being built by the Maoists in Dandakaranya:

> It's not an alternative yet, this idea of Gram Swaraj with a Gun. There's too much hunger, too much sickness here. But it has certainly created the possibilities for an alternative. Not for the whole world, not for Alaska, or New Delhi, nor even perhaps for the whole of Chhattisgarh, but for itself. For Dandakaranya.[27]

However Leftist intellectuals such as Achin Vanaik, Sumanta Banerjee and Jairus Banaji have been more skeptical. Jairus Banaji, in a response to Roy's article published in the blog *Kafila* questioned Roy's glowing tribute to the Maoists and indirectly raised questions about the efficacy of the Maoist strategy itself. He argued:

> Arundhati clearly believes that the Indian state is such a bastion of oppression and unrelieved brutality that there is no alternative to violent struggle or 'protracted war'. If all you had in India were forest communities and corporate predators, tribals and paramilitary forces, the government and the Maoists, her espousal of the Maoists might just cut ice. But where does the rest of India fit in? What categories do we have for them? Or are we seriously supposed to believe that the extraordinary tide

of insurrection will wash over the messy landscapes of urban India and over the millions of disorganised workers in our countryside without the emergence of a powerful social agency, a broad alliance of salaried and wage-earning strata,that can contest the stranglehold of capitalism?[28]

Banaji's critique of Roy may be read as a critique of the Maoist strategy itself. What Banaji pointed out was that since India is not simply a forest where the state apparatus is torturing the forest dwellers (tribals mostly) but also consists of a huge urban society and a peasant society which has its own complexities, a military war against the state is unlikely to be successful in the absence of mass movements that are non-violent and democratic in nature. He also said that Roy's vision (by implication that of the Maoists) is that of a primitive communism rather than that of transcending capitalism and the Maoists are following a road that will lead to false promises and thousands are likely to become 'martyrs' in the process.

Achin Vanaik, in the essay mentioned above makes a similar argument.[29] He acknowledges the growth of the Maoist movement in recent times but argues that Maoist strategy in the long term 'is simply a recipe for comprehensive failure, and in the short and medium term paves the way for many damaging and unacceptable practices'. This he says is for several reasons. First, military strategy cannot in the long run succeed against the Indian state. Second, a military strategy results in a top-down command structure, which reduces the scope for internal debates and promotes secrecy and strict obedience. It also creates a culture of hostility towards those who do not share their viewpoint. This results in stifling of debates and extremist sectarianism. Third, in such militarised forms of command structure, there is inevitably a disjuncture between the ideas of the leadership and the ideas of the mass-base that form their cadres. While the leadership is interested in long-term overthrow of the state the mass-base is more interested in immediate benefits. Sometimes contradictions emerge between the two – a poor society may benefit from building of roads but the leadership could be against such development measures as that can also help military operations of the state. Finally, the need for finances and weapons will inevitably lead to compromises with their class enemies.

Banerjee in his article mentioned above ('End of a Phase') has also echoed the views of Vanaik. He said that in the absence of leadership, many of whom have been either killed or imprisoned; the Maoists are 'fast degenerating into apolitical gangs of extortionists and revengeful killers.' They have killed ordinary villagers of their own class, who are being suspected of being informers or belonging to other Marxist parties such as CPI(M). The movement has degenerated into a turf war between various parties who claim allegiance to Marx. He also condemned the Maoists for being 'reckless' in their attack on Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee at Lalgarh for which the villagers had to bear the brunt and raised the question as to whether the Maoist leadership has managed to unite all sections of the peasantry.

Hence even though Gautam Navlakha and Arundhati Roy have backed the Maoists and have raised the question as to whether the use of force is necessarily a wrong thing to do in the face of brutal repression of the state, there are nonetheless significant critiques of the Maoist movement. The key factor that emerges from critiques by Banaji, Vanaik and Banerjee is that while the Maoists have managed to consolidate themselves in the tribal areas their exclusively militarist strategy is incapable of lasting for long against assault by the state and is not conducive to building mass movements in rural and urban India.

Failure of Parliamentary Left to Spread in the Hindi Heartland

While the opinions presented above throw some light on the decline of the parliamentary Left and the limitations of the Maoists, there are several other issues that perhaps have played their roles in the decreasing fortunes of the Left. First, the electoral defeat in West Bengal has come as a major set-back not so much because the Left Front has lost the election in the state but because the parliamentary Left had failed to grow in other states of India. If, for example, the parliamentary Left had been able to come to power or come close to power in some other states then the loss in West Bengal would have looked less severe. Hence it is important to ask the question as to why the parliamentary Left failed to expand itself beyond Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura even though it had a presence in many

other states in India. There is no clear answer to this question. In states such as Bihar for example, the parliamentary Left has become weak over the years but there has been very little attempt to understand why and create a roadmap for their revival. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the parliamentary Left has been somewhat complacent with a certain number of seats in the Parliament and have not tried to improve their position in the states where by 1990 they had a strong presence. Why in the most poverty stricken states of India the Left failed to grow is a question that needs to be answered. There are some casual answers like the role of caste politics but that does not seem to be a good enough explanation. There have been serious organisational and tactical failures which need to be accepted and addressed. On the other hand the Maoist Left, because of their strategy of armed struggle have remained confined to inaccessible areas only and have not managed to spread in areas which have massive exploitation of the poor but are not ideal for guerilla warfare. This has Left a large vacuum in poorest parts of India such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan etc where a Left movement could have developed but have failed to do so or have failed to develop sufficiently. The vacuum has been exploited by other political parties more fruitfully.

Failure to Unify Marxist Movement in India

Second, the decline of the Left in India has to be understood also in terms of a failure on part of the parliamentary Left and the extremist Left to build a common platform against the ruling classes. While it is understandable that there would be ideological and strategic differences, it is difficult to understand why therefore the two types of Marxist parties would end up behaving like rivals trying to finish each other off rather than to try and build at least a common minimum programme amongst themselves. It is ironic that CPI(M) could enter into a common minimum programme with Congress but could not see anything positive in the Maoists while the Maoists in their turn could tie up with Trinamool Congress and kill CPI(M) cadres. The various Marxist parties, including CPI-ML, have spent more time finding theoretical and strategic faults with each other than trying to find the minimum basis on which a Leftist coalition

can be built. While the Hindu right could create a 'Sangh Parivar' consisting of organisations such as BJP (parliamentary) and RSS (non-parliamentary) it was not possible for the Marxist parties to forget old rivalries and build a 'baam parivar'.

Inefficient Implementation of Policies

Third, I agree with Bardhan and others that the Left Front has failed to build a model of human development in West Bengal that it can show-case to the rest of the country to win votes elsewhere. However we need to take this point further and ask the question why this was the case? The answer to my mind is that in Marxist theory while there is lot of emphasis on analysis of capitalism, class structure and various modes of exploitation, the only answer to it seems to be revolution or agitation leading to capture of power. It is almost as if once revolution takes place, or the party of the working class/ subjugated classes come to power electorally everything else will automatically follow. In other words, all you need then is to have the right policies, the socio-economic transformation would follow on its own. What failure of the Left in West Bengal has shown is that not just the right kind of policies but also efficient implementation of those policies that is important. In other words, it is important to build an efficient system of governance that would be able to carry out desired transformation over a stretch of time. As I grew up, the work culture of the state government officials were a source of joke to everybody around me. Unfortunately there was never any attention paid to the transformation of the machinery that would carry out the transformation in agriculture, health and education. The result is that West Bengal's performance in human development is that of a middle-ranking state in India. Yet the party or its intellectuals have never tried to investigate how the machinery of the government can be made more efficient in its implementation of poverty alleviation programmes. If they would have, then there would been at least some major improvements in the way the administrative system worked, reduction of delay in processing of files, re-engineering of delivery mechanisms, so on and so forth. Perhaps it would also have been possible to build public sector companies with humane labour practices. What happened

unfortunately was a total neglect of the art and science of governance but lot of fine tuning of the process of control through local level bossism by party leaders. Ironically, this had a telling blow on the fortunes of the Left Front when the inefficient administration failed to manage any of the explosive events (Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh, Rizwanur Rahman's death, PDS, etc,) that finally defeated Left Front in 2011. Even the much applauded panchayati raj system of the state failed to implement the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) which could have made a difference to the electoral fortunes of the Left.

Excessive Dependence on Soviet Union and China

Fourth, the Left has suffered from excessive reliance on Soviet Union and China for theoretical inspiration.[30] Since the fall of the Soviet Union the parliamentary Left in India has failed to come up with its own theoretical understanding and programmatic milestones by combining their ideology with indigenous intellectual traditions. It opposed the market reform of Congress, sometimes correctly, but then did not come up with its own set of policies as to what road India should follow in order to reach the position of a developed country. At best it looked like a defender of Nehruvian Socialism. The situation became even worse when the party allowed Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee to invite capitalist investment but opposed Manmohan Singh's policies at the Centre as Pranab Bardhan has pointed out. Such theoretical confusions within CPI(M) made it look hypocritical. Till the mid-90s, it could create an alternative vision, though a social democratic one, of land-reform and panchayati raj but it then failed to develop any definite future agenda of its own except for an opposition to the Hindu right wing and liberalisation. The Maoist Left on the other hand, in spite of showing laudable courage and determination, has ended up in a situation where it is one after another losing its top leaders and does not have an alternative plan in case the violent route is not working.

Wrong Choice of Friends

Fifth, the Left showed an uncanny ability to find the wrong type of friends. The Leftist movement found itself completely at a loss as new movements based on environment, gender, sexuality,

sustainable agriculture, education, dalit identity, etc., took over the space of democratic agitations since the 1980s. Instead of creatively intertwining its own traditional agitations on land and labour with such new movements, the Left in fact turned conservative and suspicious of them as was reflected in its negative outlook towards civil society organisations (CSOs). As a result it missed the opportunity of finding friends among a large number of organisations and activists who were perhaps not Marxist but nonetheless fighting against economic exploitation and social discrimination. The parliamentary and Maoist Left, instead of building alliances with CSOs with strong credibility and movements such as that of Medha Patkar, Aruna Roy or Sundarlal Bahuguna criticised and distanced themselves from them but formed alliances with populist reactionary political parties. Maoists and SUCI found an ally in Trinamool Congress, CPI(M) joined hands with BJP to oust Congress from power and later joined hands with Congress to oust BJP and also tried to create what is known as a 'Third Front' with parties of dubious credentials. Perhaps it would have been better if the Left would have spent its energies on building its own base on the basis of agitations on improvement of the human development record of India (which has been shamefully poor) with Kerala as its model instead of trying to build alliances with parties which are at best populist and at worst corrupt.

Ineffective Communication Strategies

Sixth, the decline of the Left was precipitated by its inability to develop effective communication strategies. Debates and discussions on Marxism among the party members and supporters became rare in West Bengal by 1990 and were perhaps not encouraged either. When I was adolescent boy, as I have discussed in the first chapter, there were beautifully produced and affordable books, fiction and non-fiction, that were published in the Soviet Union and translated in Bengali, which inspired me. They worked as the entry-point to more complex texts on Marxism. Today there is no shortage of materials on Marxism but they are available only in English. This is strange given the fact that Marxism is supposed to be an ideology of the working class. One can find books in English published in UK that use popular comic book style to explain Marxism[31].

Unfortunately such books are not available in Bengali or Hindi or even in the form of inexpensive Indian editions. There is also hardly any reader friendly account of the key achievements of the Left in India. If for example, someone wants to read a lucid narrative of the land reform movement in Bengali or Hindi can one get it? The answer is no. A Marxist publishing house called *Leftword* has published a book on the people's plan movement in Kerala but there is no Bengali or Hindi edition of it.[32] There is also a huge gap between the scholarly Marxist writings which are mostly published abroad and the ordinary citizen in India. Over the last twenty years, a large number of important books and articles have been written by Marxist thinkers like David Harvey, Alex Callinicos, Marshall Berman, Terry Eagleton and others who have both enriched Marxist thinking and developed powerful critiques of contemporary capitalism. Unfortunately such books are in English and usually expensive given the exchange rate. As a result such books remain confined within a narrow intellectual circle. Marxist books are also published in India by some publishers but once again mostly it is in English. CPI(M)'s journals, *People's Democracy* and *The Marxist* are also available only in English. *Economic and Political Weekly*, the most important independent pro-Left journal to be published in India, is also available only in English. Video recording of David Harvey's lectures on Marx's *Das Capital* are now available in the internet but why is not something similar available in Hindi or any other vernacular language in India by an Indian Marxist scholar? During the period when the Left movement built its base in Bengal and India the role of cultural activists like Salil Chowdhury, poets like Sukanta Bhattacharya and theatre groups like the IPTA was vital in translating complex Marxist theory into popular idioms of protest that inspired the youth. Today such cultural activism is almost non-existent. This absence of easily available and attractively packaged books, videos, songs, street theatres and resources on the net in vernacular language has resulted in a situation where the corporate controlled vernacular print and electronic media have become hegemonic. Needless to say, they are mostly anti-Left. In recent times Leftist blogs, of different Marxist orientations, have come up. What is unfortunately common to all of them is that they publish articles that are usually in English and do not have Hindi or other vernacular language versions. Internet, in any case, has a limited reach. While it is true that Left parties have their own Bengali newspaper (Ganashakti) and sympathetic television channel (24 Ghanta), they have focused more on pro-CPI(M) news coverage rather than promotion of debates on Marxism.

Failure to Attract Urban Youth

Finally, Left has failed to expand its base in the urban areas, both among the poor and the middle-class. When Marxism took root in India, it was the urban centres of colonial India which first saw the rise of Marxism. This is true not only in case of Kolkata but also other parts of India. In Bengal, both the rise of CPI(M) as a political force as well as the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and early 70s had a strong urban component. However after more than three decades of Left rule in West Bengal, CPI(M) failed to improve its voting percentage in Kolkata and was actually wiped out in 2011 election in the greater Kolkata region. Over time, CPI(M) and CPI lost their urban bases in other parts of India. One explanation of this failure is that globalisation has made the middle-class more consumerist and apolitical. This is however not a good enough explanation. What is more correct is probably that because of the electoral arithmetic CPI(M) was complacent that its rural vote bank would always bring it to power and hence completely neglected its mobilisation in the urban areas. Similarly, it failed to increase its base among the urban poor of the informal sector, as Pranab Bardhan has noted. One can perhaps understand theoretically why a communist party would not be interested in winning over the middle-class but there is simply no explanation for its failure to mobilise the urban poor in the informal sector. Other Leftist political parties, including the Maoists, have also failed to mobilise this section of the population, which is increasing day-by-day as India becomes more urbanised.

I said earlier that one can theoretically understand why a communist party would be less interested in the middle-class, but such a theoretical position is however a mistake. It is a mistake because of two reasons. First, if one looks at the history of Marxism, one would see that it is not one specific social class that has become believers in the ideology but rather a mixture of all classes and the educated middle-class everywhere have played an important role in leadership of the Marxist political movements. Based on historical

experience it is safe to say that all workers and peasants did not join the Marxist movements around the world even if the Marxist parties claimed to represent them; only some did. Similarly although Marxism theoretically talked of a dictatorship of the proletariat and not of the economically more solvent classes, nonetheless people belonging to the economically better-off sections have joined these movements. Second, in India the middle-class has a disproportionately higher impact on media discourses in comparison to its percentage of total population. It is also the middle-class that largely fills the ranks of the bureaucracy, the media, the CSOs and the academia.

Party-centric Tribalism

Why did the Left parties fail to win over the middle-class or at least retain its base? While conceding that consumerism and globalisation had an important role to play I would argue that this has a lot to do with a certain kind of party centric tribalism. This means that the party and its loyalists form a kind of tribe[33], and everyone else, whether they are Marxist or not, are outsiders if not opponents. This tribalism is not peculiar to India alone, it has been seen in Soviet Union and elsewhere as well. This is in direct conflict with individualism which is a characteristic of urban modernity. There is no evidence to suggest that Marxist parties cannot succeed without this tribalism and enough evidence to show that the parties have lost many sympathisers and even potential party members because the party interfered in personal choices of the individuals. There have been many such instances in my life which has distanced bright young minds from Marxist parties. Mrinal Sen's film *Padatik* (The Guerilla Fighter) has shown how a Marxist revolutionary raises questions and the party senior leader thinks that he is getting corrupted. There are also such examples in Samaresh Majumdar's award-winning and popular novel, *Kalbela*[34], which is situated in late 60s and early 70s before Left Front came to power. Such behaviour, though deeply entrenched and by no means a recent phenomenon, has nothing to do with Marxism as a theory of emancipation from capitalist exploitation but more to do with the practice of Marxism as a tribal culture where sacred rituals cannot be questioned and those who do not belong to the tribe are treated

with suspicion. In an urban society, especially among a section of the population which has access to choice and information to survive without the support of the party, such pseudo-tribalism acts as a repulsive force for those who value their individualism. Thus although there are some definite advantages of trying to propagate Marxism among educated urban middle-class such as their ability to read Marxist texts, this party-centric tribalism takes them away from Marxism. It is safe to say that many Marxist sympathisers/ pro-poor persons have turned away from Marxist parties and even turned against them because of this attitudinal problem of party bosses rather than theoretical incompatibility.

Prospects of Renewal

It is perhaps a positive sign in itself that following the 2011 Assembly Election debacle there has been a significant debate in the public sphere as to what went wrong in the Left movement and what course of action the left should take in the future. As in case of the discussions on the reasons behind the decline of the Left there were several strands of thought expressed by various intellectuals and practitioners. In an article 'A Long and Arduous Struggle Ahead', written immediately after the electoral debacle, Prakash Karat, General Secretary of CPI(M) reiterated what may be called a purist position. He said that after 'critical self-evaluation' the party will take up the issues of the basic classes and fight for the interest of the working people by opposing neo-liberal economic policies, defending the livelihood of the people, defense of national sovereignty and secularism.[35]

His position was fairly close to that of Prabhat Patnaik, who in a lecture in a seminar on the '20 Years after the Fall of USSR '[36] said that in the contemporary world capitalism has reached again a position of crisis and in the present situation the Left in India should (a) protect the small farmers and petty producers who are being attacked by the hegemony of the international finance capital, (b) resist and agitate against imperialism but not just the United States of America, (c) stand for modernity, which for him means in case of India, protection the democracy which has given everybody an equal vote in a society which is still caste-ridden, and (d) he

encouraged the Marxists themselves to develop the 'taste for theory' as Marxism is to him first and foremost a struggle at the realm of theory. There was a slight difference between what Karat said in the article in Pragoti and what Patnaik said in the lecture in the sense that while Karat spoke specifically about CPI(M), Patnaik used the word 'left' rather than any particular party as such. However Karat was sitting next to him when he spoke and one can reasonably safely say that he had CPI(M) or Left Front in mind when he was saying this. In an earlier article published in The Telegraph, Patnaik tried to analyse what was right with CPI(M).[37] In an obvious attempt to see the better side of the party rather than making an objective assessment, Patnaik says that whatever might be the result of the election of the two states (Kerala and West Bengal) nearly half of the population of the two most intellectually advanced states of India would still continue to support CPI(M) and a large number of bright young students would feel attracted towards CPI(M) and this means something must be also right about CPI(M) just as there are many omissions and commissions. According to him, there are aspects which make CPI(M) different from other major political parties: (a) it is the only modern force in the Indian society, other parties represent 'Hindutva' or allegiance to Nehru-Gandhi family; (b) CPI(M) has consistently promoted democracy; and (c) CPI(M) has been the most consistent anti-imperialist party. We may read this as the self-image of the CPI(M) that he would like them to maintain.

Thus the approach that Karat and Patnaik were proposing is that CPI(M) or the organised Left should remain committed to its traditional anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist stand, protect the interest of the 'basic classes' and fight for modernity through a defense of secularism and a defense of democracy.

The second position, which may be described as a social democratic line, is represented by scholars like Ramchandra Guha, Pranab Bardhan and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya. Guha, in his characteristically controversial style, says that 'It may be that of all the major parties in India, it is only the leaders of the CPI(M) who do not have Swiss bank accounts'.[38] He argued that 'India needs a Left'. But the question is what kind of Left? He is dismissive of the Maoists as 'romantics' as they believe that they can overthrow the Indian state by force. He clearly has more faith in the parliamentary

Left. However there are certain changes that he would like to see in the parliamentary Left. What are those? First, the Left must stop living in the Cold War era and stop seeing the Americans as enemies all the time and while giving the Chinese a benefit of doubt. Second, the 'modern Left', according to Guha, should take into consideration the growing middle-class population of India who are skeptical of the existing political parties. The Left should present itself as a party that is in favour of growth but also inclusion of the poorest and the marginalised. Third, the Left should be more open to activist groups, such as those fighting for the environment for example, but who perhaps do not have faith in Leninism. Guha also believes that the Left made a mistake by not joining the national government, thereby implying that it should do so in future if it gets a chance. This they need to do in order to push for land reform and other progressive measures at the national level. Thus, Guha argues for a Left that is modern (in agreement with Karat and Patnaik) but more open to USA and private capitalists (unlike Karat and Patnaik) and pro-welfare for the poor.

A similar line was proposed by Pranab Bardhan. He argued that, 'Left parties have to give up on their blatant hypocrisy on market reform.'[39] They will have to accept both market reform and what was once described by them as 'bourgeois democracy'. He considers both good as they result in competition. Having accepted market reform and democracy, the Left should, according to him, 'concentrate on leading popular struggles against capitalist excesses and injustices'[40], which is exemplified in the form of 'rampant inequality and the consequent capture of political processes, displacement of poor people, macroeconomic instability – most recently due to short-sighted recklessness of unregulated financial markets abroad, and environmental degradation.'[41] In terms of examples to follow he recommends Latin American countries like Costa Rica and Brazil who have combined market led growth with strong welfare systems.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, while concentrating his analysis on how CPI(M) in West Bengal created a 'party-society' has briefly addressed the issue as to what the left needs to do in future in order to revive itself.[42] His line is more or less similar to that of Guha and Bardhan although it is not clear whether he shares the same views related to the market. He said:

> It is by addressing the issues of primary education, nutrition, basic healthcare, and environmental sustenance, rights of the social minorities, cultural freedom to debate and differ, and protection of the informal working classes in the face of an onslaught by the predatory global capital that the Left can hope to build an imaginative politics of inclusion. An optic geared narrowly to electoral contestations can ill afford to offer such perspectives.[43]

What he refers to as an 'imaginative politics of inclusion' is perhaps not very far from arguing for a strong welfare state within an overall capitalist system.

The third strand is represented by several loosely formed, non-CPI(M) and non-Maoist Marxists. We may call them the 'new Left'. This is represented by intellectuals like Jairus Banaji, Aditya Nigam, Achin Vanaik and Sumanta Banerjee. In a manifesto like statement following the electoral defeat of CPI(M) which was first circulated in Facebook for endorsement and then published in the form of a letter in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jairus Banaji, Sukumar Muralidharan, Dilip Simeon, Satya Sivaraman and Rohini Hensman argued that the fall of CPI(M) is by no means the end of the Left in India.[44] They argued that the Left in India is a much bigger spectrum than simply the Left parties. It includes organisations, movements and trade unions that are not subservient to any particular party. The defeat of the parliamentary Left, in their opinion, would actually result in the creation of a space for such 'new Left' movements to grow further as they reflect the aspirations of the people more creatively and with greater integrity than the Left parties. They authors argued that this non parliamentary, non-Maoist Left would continue to flourish in the coming years and a younger and radical generation will be attracted towards it.

Sumanta Banerjee has also shown little faith in the existing Left parties in India.[45] He thinks that 'Marxism as the ancestor of a prescient anti-capitalist critique still enjoys validity in modern history, but as a progenitor of models of revolutionary change has sired a legacy of failed experiments.'[46] In the present Indian context, he has suggested that the Maoists and CPI(M) should take a break from exclusive 'jungle warfare' on the one hand and 'electoral politics' on the other, and learn from participating in various mass

movements on issues like environment, women's emancipation, anti-SEZ movements, food entitlement, etc. In another article, Banerjee has said that the 'New Indian Left' should reject the hegemony of the CPI(M) and build a 'broad formation' of smaller Left parties and various non-parliamentary but non-violent mass movements and try to find an alternative strategy for socio-economic change.[47]

In an article, For a Left Resurgence cited earlier, Dipankar Bhattacharya of CPI-ML, has argued for a line that perhaps resembles the 'New Indian Left' of Sumanta Banerjee. Although Bhattacharya spent most of his article criticising CPI(M) and Prabhat Patnaik, towards the end he points towards the possible road for Left resurgence. He argues that the Left needs to be open about movements such as the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare but deepen them further and take them to their logical conclusion. He argues that after two decades of neo-liberal policies, a large section of the population is unhappy with such policy changes. In such a situation the Left must integrate itself with the resistances of various sections of the people and thereby reinvigorate itself. Thus Bhattacharya, is not arguing for the Left representing any particular class (the working class or the peasantry) but for joining the different kinds of struggles that are emerging against neo-liberal capitalism.

A fourth line of thinking is represented by Kripa Shankar, a former full-time activist of CPI. In an article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, in response to Prabhat Patnaik's article, 'Left in Decline' he argued that the evidence is overwhelming that CPI(M) is no different from any other 'bourgeois party' which has given up the struggle for transcending capitalism.[48] Hence he called for a 'a new communist party which will be consistent in its opposition to the capitalist path and will depend on mass mobilisation and mass upsurge to dethrone the ruling bourgeoisie rather than forming a united front with it and thereby end as a stooge of the bourgeoisie.'[49] In other words, Shankar agrees with the Leninist core of Patnaik's argument, but sees no future in CPI(M) and thinks that only a new communist party can carry forward the task with which the Communist Party of India was born.

Any Future for the Left?

If this is, more or less, the spectrum of thinking as to how the Left

can rejuvenate itself, what is the prospect for the Left? Unlike the intellectuals and scholars mentioned above I do not think that I know which way the Left should move in the future. What I do know is that in future the Left in India would travel along different paths, so it is perhaps futile to try and prescribe one path. I also know that there are perhaps certain conditions which are favourable for a growth of Left movement in India. The first of course is the fact that capitalism as an idea no more has the kind of hegemony that it had when Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history two decades ago. There are very few unashamed champions of capitalism just as there are very few champions of Soviet style centralised economy. Even in the USA, the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement has shown how badly punctured the reputation of capitalism as an idea is. Second, within India, there is perhaps no party which enjoys a massive popular support. Congress has declined after Rajiv Gandhi, BJP's grand Hindutva dreams have not really worked, and caste-based parties have not really lived up to their promise. The Indian polity is divided among many small units of different hues. If there is no wave in favour of the Left parties there is certainly no wave at the national level for other parties either. Even BJP's victory in 2014 was on the basis of about 31% vote share. Thus it is unlikely that Left parties will be wiped out in the next decade or so by the emergence of a single right-wing wave across the country. Third, with the growth of the urban middle class a certain percentage of the youth population from middle and upper-middle educated classes will drift towards the Left as they are doing now. The emergence of the social network sites and the burst of protests across the world by the urban middle class, from Cairo to New York to Moscow are only likely to inspire more and more middle class youth to drift towards the Left of some kind or the other. Even if they do not join any political party they are likely to remain attached to the Leftist cause.

Such favourable conditions of course do not mean that the Left will grow; it only means that the Left will survive. In order to grow there are many challenges that have to be creatively overcome. I can think of six such challenges. The first is of course organisational. The Left parties or organisations would have to keep corruption at minimum and build further on their image of relatively cleaner political parties. One of the ways of ensuring that corruption is low

is of course to punish the guilty and thereby set an example, but it is also important to continuously build and reinforce the ethos of working for the poor, thereby inculcating an alternative value-system. Mass-base is created when the poor people see that party workers are constantly helping them out in their daily problems. Somebody may urgently need some medical help; somebody may need to send his/her child to a school, an old person may need help to know how to get old age pension from the panchayat, so on and so forth. On the other hand mass-base is lost when poor people see that the party-worker has become the boss to be feared rather than the friend to be loved. The Leftist organisation also needs to sufficiently reward young members who do outstanding work for the poor, recognise his/her talent and create scope for his/her upward mobility within the organisation. If the leadership of an organisation is based on loyalty, sycophancy or age rather than merit and efficiency then the organisation is bound to stop attracting talent. No party can grow, irrespective of the sophistication of its philosophy, unless it is able to build its mass-base, attract talent and nurture them.

The second important challenge is to define the goal that the Left organisation is trying to reach in the short and medium terms. By 'goal' I do not however refer to something like a dream – something vague such as a class-less communist society. I am referring to something that is realistically achievable. It will be wonderful if the Left can create at least a blue-print for a post-capitalist economy. To the best of my knowledge, this does not exist at the moment. Hence, my suggestion is to take the welfare state as a provisional ideal till the blue print for a communist economy is ready. Thus I am agreeing with Guha, Bardhan and Bhattacharyya in this regard but I do not think that there is any contradiction between accepting the welfare state as a provisional goal and fighting against imperialism and neo-liberalism, which Patnaik stresses on. To consider the welfare state as a provisional goal does not mean this is the ideal form of state and economy and research on something better can always carry on simultaneously. This of course is only a suggestion, what is however needed beyond doubt is a well-defined goal. The goal will in turn determine the movements that the Left would participate in and spend its energies on. If the goal is a Bolshevik state then the movements would be of

one type, if the goal is a democratic welfare state then the movements would be of another type.

The third challenge would be to revive the agenda of land reform and panchayati raj in India. By land reform I do not mean only the re-distribution of land but also exploration of different ways in which agriculture can be practiced so that poor and marginal farmers can economically gain from it. While land reform cannot be done unless a Marxist party comes to power at the state level, there are many possibilities of making a difference by entering the local state. In most states of India panchayats are badly run by inefficient and corrupt rural elite. If the Left can win at the panchayat level and make a difference then they are likely to grow in influence. It is now quite evident that the developments related to decentralised planning done in Kerala did not find many takers outside that state and even in Kerala there has been a partial roll-back after the EMS phase. Hence there is a massive opportunity for the Left to radicalise the panchayati raj system of the country.

Fourth, the Left would have to build strategic and tactical partnerships with CSOs which work for the poor but do not necessarily believe in Marxism. In a country such as India, a purist Left is unlikely to spread its influence far and wide. For example, an organisation may be doing very good work on child labour issues but may not believe in Marxism. It will be a challenge for the Marxists to learn from such and organisation and work on child labour issues. There may be common grounds such as quality education and efficient public health system for all which the Left can take up along with organisations who may be otherwise in favour of capitalism.

The fifth challenge is how to reach out to the urban population that is growing every day. This means not just the middle-class but also the poor in the informal sector. It is of course not difficult to show that the urban poor are exploited in the cities but there has been very little initiative from the Left to organise them and build a mass-base among this segment. In almost no city of India the Left has managed to build a movement based on the demands of the informal sector. The base of the Left among the urban middle-class has also eroded over time. This has a lot to do with the fact that the middle-class has to a large extent benefited from globalisation of the economy but it will be a mistake, as I have said in the earlier

section, to think that the urban middle-class is therefore anti-Left. What is required is a new Left imagination, through which the Left can locate itself in the forefront of the struggle for a more equal and modern society and fight against labour exploitation, against patriarchal exploitation of men and women, against exploitation of children and discrimination based on caste, gender and religion.

Finally, I do not agree with the view that the existing Left parties have nothing more to offer and only a 'new Left' can take the Left movement forward. To begin with, it is not at all clear why the 'new Left' could not grow in states where the Maoists or the parliamentary Left was weak or non-existent. Surely, the Maoists or CPI(M) did not prevent the 'new Left' from emerging in the states where they are not present? In fact to argue that only the 'new Left' is the true Left and others are not is an arrogant statement which is not backed by serious achievements. On the other hand, what I consider to be the most important challenge is to forget the past rivalries and build a common minimum programme across all shades of Left. There is certainly no shortage of common grounds. In a discussion on contemporary agrarian crisis in India, V.K. Ramchandran has pointed out that to solve the agrarian question in contemporary India is to achieve the following:

- To free the countryside of all forms of landlordism, old and new.
- To free the working peasantry and manual workers from their present fetters of unfreedom and drudgery and to guarantee them the means of income and livelihood.
- To redistribute agricultural land.
- To provide the rural working people with house-sites, and basic, clean, sanitary homes and habitations.
- To create the conditions for the liberation of the people of the scheduled castes and tribes, of women, and other victims of sectional deprivation.
- To ensure universal formal school education.
- To achieve the general democratisation of life and progressive cultural development in rural India.[50]

I wonder which Marxist party/organisation in India would not consider these to be causes worth fighting for. One can also point

out other areas of common concern such as opposing Hindutva politics including its new 'development' face, increasing penetration of multinational seed companies corporate loot of resources in the name of development, displacement and marginalisation of the poor, rampant use of informal and child labour for the purpose of profit making, etc. Finding common issues is not an intellectual problem, the problem lies in the inability to forget past rivalries and move on. A divided Left that is always fighting amongst each other has limited chance of growth in the coming years. As this book is finally going to press there are signs that at least the parliamentary Left parties have shown an inclination to come together in different parts of the country. On this note of optimism let me end my story.

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