

The Biter Bit

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

For almost 35 years the Left Front, effectively the Communist Party of India –Marxist ruled the State of West Bengal. Its beginning was auspicious because through Operation Barga it gave the tenants some security of tenure on the land that they tilled and held from the owner, the Jotedar. Operation Barga of which Hare Krishna Konar as Revenue Minister was the originator and Debu Bandopadhyay IAS, the Land Reforms Commissioner was the operationaliser, brought to a state plagued by the iniquities of the Permanent Settlement of Cornwallis and the land lordism it brought in its wake, the very definite hope that the tiller of the soil would become its owner. The environment of hope that it created in rural Bengal served the party well. Through Operation Barga the party was able to strengthen all local units from village upwards, to an extent where the government at local levels functioned according to the diktat of the party workers. This gave CPI (M) a very strong foundation in the rural areas, which fact was converted to votes in election after election. That is why till Mamata Banerjee came on the scene the Left appear to be so permanently rooted that no one could even think about a West Bengal not ruled by the Left Front.

Operation Barga was the rural face of CPI(M). The urban face was the strength of the party's trade unions which used hartal, gherao, bandh and even outright violence as the weapon to dominate industry. The strength of Calcutta's economy lay in its industry and its financial business and by the time CPI(M) finished with both sectors they were in shambles. Labour indiscipline did not bring benefit to the workers, but rather it led to the closure of a great deal of the industrial infrastructure of West Bengal. It also led to an intense investor distrust in West Bengal and caused a major flight of capital. The development of the Haldia Complex by the West Bengal Government was its effort to show that it was keen to bring industry to Bengal, but its failure to curb labour militancy led to the failure of even Haldia as a show case. In fact the only real success of the West Bengal Government was that because of the very acute power shortage caused by over staffing and indiscipline in the West Bengal Electricity Board, government was forced to take the hard decision of appointing a Chairman of the Board with a clear mandate to restore discipline and to improve the power situation. It is only after he restored discipline that there was a dramatic improvement in generation and distribution and today West Bengal has a relatively stable energy regime. The fact that overstaffing was done Ghani Khan Chaudhary under the Congress regime made it easier to retrench because one thus eliminated workers beholden to Congress.

One aspect of Left Front rule was that it was considered a legitimate electoral tactic for the party to threaten, overawe and dominate the electorate, in which violence was considered permissible, even lauded. Year after year, from village level right up to the parliamentary elections CPI (M) workers either rigged the election through the ballot box or by either preventing voters with opposition sympathy from voting or by arranging booth capture, etc. This power over the voters and the process of voting was ultimately broken by the Election Commission through two measures:-

1. The electronic voting machine which is almost impossible to rig.
2. The deployment of both polling and security staff from outside the State to ensure that electoral irregularities were controlled and voters given a fair chance to vote.

Taking advantage of this Mamata Banerjee paid the CPI(M) back with its own coin, using agitation, organised public protests and even counter violence to even the balance at the time of election. As the grip of CPI (M) workers over the electorate loosened so Mamata Banerjee's aggression provided that force which brought about the humiliating defeat of CPI (M) and other Left forces. The miscalculation of the Left Front Government in Singur – the Nano project – and Nandigram exposed CPI(M)'s claim of being the party of the people and opened a chink in its armour, which Mamata ruthlessly exploited.

Mamata Banerjee faced the daunting task of governing a State which had been dominated by a single political party, whose workers had penetrated and permeated the administrative system. One had high hopes that she would begin by cleansing the administration of elements which had virtually sold themselves to the CPI (M). The bureaucracy has a very strong survival instinct and one phenomenon that was observed was that those who had apparently ideologically aligned with CPI (M) abandoned the party as soon as the government changed. The same bad elements who had facilitated misrule in the previous regime occupied key positions in the new regime. One result was that just as they had given a free hand to party goondas in the Left Front Government they have given a free hand to party goondas supporting Mamata Banerjee. In other words, the rule of law continues to be bypassed under the new government in West Bengal. The only change is that now the victims of violence are the workers of CPI (M).

The present panchayat elections in West Bengal are a disgrace. They are certainly not free and fair because an election held in an environment of violence can never be fair. Mamata Banerjee's avowed objective is to destroy the Left Front. That should be done politically and not by street violence. If the tactics remain the same and only the victims change, then is the new government different from the old one? Everyone targets Narendra Modi for violence in 2002, which has not been replicated even once in Gujarat in the next eleven years. Is violence in West Bengal less serious because it is a political group rather than a community which is being targeted? I am sure that victims of violence would be hard put to give a ranking to different forms of violence because whether one dies on communal account or on political account, one is equally dead. CPI (M) is naturally sore at what Mamata is doing to the party, but it is a classic case of "the biter bit". What it did to others is now happening to CPI (M). But that still leaves the question unanswered, "Can anything in a democratic society ever justify the rule of the jungle?" Mamataji, the answer is a resounding NO.
