“Communist” dispossession meets “reactionary” resistance: The ironies of the parliamentary Left in West-Bengal

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Abstract: The reflections in this article were instigated by the repeated and brutal clashes since 2007 between peasants and the state government’s militias—both official and unofficial—over the issue of industrialization. A communist government engaging peasants violently in order to acquire and transfer their lands to big business houses to set up capitalist enterprises seemed dramatically ironic. Despite the presence of many immediate causes for the conflict, subtle long-term change to the nature of communist politics in the state was also responsible for the present situation. This article identifies two trends that, though significant, are by themselves not enough to explain what is happening in West Bengal today. First, the growth of a culture of governance where the Communist Party actively seeks to manage rather than politicize social conflicts; second, the recasting of radical political subjectivity as a matter of identity rather than an instigation for critical self-reflection and self-transformation.

Keywords: Bengal, *bhdrolok*, ethnicity, Kanoria Jute Mill, Marxism

The events at Nandigram and Singur in West Bengal were such that it forced many—if not most—of those who follow South Asian affairs to rethink their beliefs and positions.¹ The manifest contradiction of the naked oppression unleashed—both through official and unofficial channels—by an allegedly communist government on an impoverished peasantry in the interests of big industry was so obvious, that it forced many to ask how this could happen. What was even more disturbing was that it could not be attributed to ideologically corrupt elements in the lower echelons of the party. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CP([M])) bosses kept a

belligerent attitude even in the face of the gruesome live pictures of police firing upon unarmed women and children—beamed to the comforts of the average middle-class home thanks to satellite television channels—and clearly supported such actions. Even as some of the older leaders of the Left Front (the ruling coalition) found themselves unable to support the government’s action, the younger leaders of the party persisted in calling the farmers “reactionaries.”

The state of West Bengal, which came into being through the division of the erstwhile British Indian province of Bengal in 1947 between the newly independent India and Pakistan, has

a long tradition of radical politics. The massive displacement of people through the traumatic partition further stoked this radical political culture and in the 1960s and 1970s there emerged a robust strand of militant communism. Though many of these communist radicals were devoted to extra-parliamentary and violent politics, eventually a parliamentary strand of communism was voted to office in 1977. The Left Front has since held unbroken power in the state, winning repeated elections. As extra-parliamentary communism has been increasingly marginalized in the three decades since 1977, the parliamentary left has emerged as the longest serving communist government to be elected through a multi-party election. This same parliamentary left has however steadily changed the meaning of communist politics.

All of us who had callously tossed around the words “reactionary,” “radical,” “bourgeois,” “communist” over endless cups of tea and cheap cigarettes in an era before Coca Cola came to the Calcutta *pan*-shop, seemed to have learned our dictionaries wrong. The words seemed now to mean exactly the opposite of what we had thought they meant. “Bourgeois” and “reactionary” now seemed to mean anyone opposed to the government and anybody speaking for the peasantry. Even the extreme left, which eschewed parliamentary democracy, had thus become “reactionaries” and “bourgeois.” Similarly the tag “radical” could now be used to describe those who supported forcible eviction of farmers from their lands in the name of big industry. “Communist” could now be legitimately applied to those who offered immense tax cuts to the biggest industrial houses in the region. Could it be that there was an Evil Genius who had changed the meanings of the words while we slept? Or had it taken longer? How did we not notice what was going on? This article is part of an ongoing personal quest to find an answer to this question: to identify the Evil Genius.

The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that this change could not and did not happen overnight and cannot simply be attributed to the machinations of a handful of new leaders. Its roots go further back, and the changes

that made Singur and Nandigram possible were in motion long before 2007. Its roots lay in fact in the very nature of the CPI(M)’s politics in Bengal since their rise to power in the late 1970s. In this context I limit my discussion to two such long-term dimensions of CPI(M) politics in Bengal and show why I feel that what we are seeing today has its roots in the distant past. It is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis. There are many other factors, both immediate and longer term, which are possibly equally important. I do not propose that the dimensions I identify are more or less important than the many more I do not discuss. But I do feel that they are illustrative of trends long at work. As with most “reflective” pieces, of course, serendipity plays a major part in the choice.

Marxism as everyday management

Anybody who has lived in Bengal during the 1980s and 1990s can attest to the growing centrality of the CPI(M)’s Local Committees (LCs) in their lives. These ubiquitous committees mediate in every local dispute—however big or small—from domestic quarrels to neighborly disagreements. Their support and concurrence is required in everything from settling a bitter domestic quarrel to obtaining a necessary government certificate/clearance. The men who sit on these hallowed LCs, however, share very little in common. One finds among them the well-meaning local school teacher as well as the local bully and strongman. Clearly not all of them are corrupt—or well-meaning—but neither are all of them communists with a deep acquaintance with the writings of Marx or Engels. Their individual proclivities need not detain us here. The important thing to note is their function. They do not espouse any fixed agenda (other than voting for the CPI(M) of course). Their status, authority, and importance in local society do not derive from any constitutional position, yet they are an integral part of the smooth functioning of the local community. Their role is simply to “manage” the lives of their community members. In a good number—even if not most cases—the

LCs have very little to gain from settling the numerous petty disputes. In most cases, these mediations do not make it into the media and hence do not allow for quantification. Yet it cannot be denied that numerous disputes between quarrelling brothers over an ancestral home or an abusive husband regularly beating his wife have been settled by the LCs for nothing (or at best a small contribution to the "party fund"). As a local system of dispute management, the value of the LC cannot be ignored. Some—predictably those not on the best of terms with the LCs—tend to detest this "interference" stating that the CPI(M) has "put politics into everything" (*sabete politics dhukiyechhe*). Ironically they have done just the opposite.

For instance, almost all who are today trying to build homes on the ever-expanding outskirts of Calcutta often complain that the LC has forced them to pay a hefty subscription to either the "party fund" or the local "sporting club." Many who are building homes in popular areas like Baruipur are not exactly struggling salaried classes and can easily afford to pay this extra sum. Indeed for many these homes are second homes—*bagan bari*—meant for weekend get-aways. There is a very understandable anger among the local poor who are being, in a sense, forced to sell out their meager homes for the *bagan baris* to be built. It is the same anger one meets with in the beautiful villages in Cornwall, where Londoners build their second homes, or on the outskirts of Chicago. This anger stems from the economic exigencies of the life of the poor on the fringes of the urban sprawl. Yet what the LC does is not politicize this anger into a co-ordinated demand for government support or local community development, but rather merely smoothen the transfer for land and hence the further eventual impoverishment of the poor. Those very people who build these homes and complain—albeit in sotto voce—of the exactions of the LC, do not appreciate that ironically it is the mediations of the latter that render the anger of the impoverished tame and thereby enable the smooth acquisition of surplus land.

This trend of using the party machinery to de-politicize disputes and to render them as "glitches

in the system in need of right management," is not limited to the level of the LCs. It permeates every aspect of the CPI(M)'s day-to-day political strategy. Let me give two relatively well-known examples in brief.

The first of these incidents took place when I was a student at the Presidency College in Calcutta in 1998. After returning from our lengthy summer vacations that year, we found that a medium-size but well-built, marbled temple devoted to Shiva had grown up plum in the middle of the college premises. The college, which is the oldest in South Asia, has a veritable legacy of being a bastion of radicalism and free-thinking. Also, at a government college in a country that is officially secular, such a building was illegal in every respect. Moreover, coming as it did in the 1990s—when the tentacles of the hated BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) seemed to be spreading everywhere—most of us saw in it yet another evil machination on the part of the Hindu right wing. As the general secretary of the student union, I was urged by my constituents and fellow students to take immediate steps to have the temple removed, before its presence got "naturalized." We notified the college authorities of our concern and asked for its immediate demolition. To our utter surprise, however, the college authorities—despite being government servants and having no right to allow such an illegal structure to exist on government property—refused to act. The principal of the college even allegedly released statements to the press supporting the structure. Where we had suspected a covert machination of the right wing and naturally expected enthusiastic support from the Left government, we were shocked to find bitter opposition.

Eventually, as the symbolic value of Presidency College to Calcutta's rich history catapulted the issue to media spotlight, we even managed to gain an audience with the then minister of higher education. The minister explained that the temple had been built by members of the college's non-academic staff and it was best not to "hurt their feelings." Moreover, all non-academic staff members at the college were members of the CITU (the Trade Union affiliated with the CPI(M)).

Eventually even as the students themselves undertook to demolish the structure, the government refused to help.

The point behind sharing the experiences of this incident is not to suggest—as some do—that on the ground level, the CPI(M) workers have communal sympathies. Rather the point is to highlight the fact that ideology and politics *do not* play a part in the day-to-day running of the party. The irony of members of a communist-backed trade union clandestinely building a temple on government property did not strike the minister as being cause for concern. What he was concerned about was in “not hurting any feelings” and trying to find a solution that would keep everybody happy.

The second incident I discuss was much better-known than the previous one. For many of my generation—who were then in high school—it marked the beginning of our disillusionment with the Left Front government. The incident I refer to here is the Kanoria Jute Mill agitation in 1993 (see Anonymous 1994; Davala 1996; Deb-nath 2003).

Jute, which was one of the major cash earners for the Bengal economy, suffered a period of decline following the partition of the province in 1947, but had again picked up its business since the 1970s. The industry had long been run along extremely exploitative lines owing to a surplus availability of labor. With the steady growth of the industry in the 1970s, as more and more willing workers turned up, the management of the mills sought to further raise profits by trying to replace permanent workers by part-timers who would work at lower pays and without any additional benefits. Initially this led to a strike, but the government then mediated a tripartite deal among the unions, the management, and itself. As it turned out, the unions—including the leftist CITU—at the behest of the government had actually officially signed away the rights of the workers by accepting most of the oppressive proposals of the management. Stunned by the sellout, a spontaneous workers’ resistance developed at the gates of the mill. Workers denied the right of their union bosses or the government to sign away their legitimate rights. As

the impoverished workers pooled their meager resources to start a community kitchen and organize a drawn-out resistance, the government unleashed brutal police violence. Despite the violence and repression, for a while the Kanoria dispute seemed to be triggering off a new wave of radical workers’ politics independent of the major political parties. With this growth also came ever greater administrative violence. One of the early organizers, Bhikari Paswan, was arrested and subsequently disappeared from police custody. His whereabouts remain unknown to this day. Other worker-organizers like Someswar Rao and Rajeshwar Rai were also martyred. The workers demanded that the mill be turned over to a workers’ co-operative but the “communist” government refused, preferring the capitalist mode under which it was being run.

While the struggles of Kanoria Jute Mill—in the very heart of the capital city—ignited in many once more the belief in the political potential of workers’ movements, it also showed that the CPI(M) government was a humungous managerial machine. Many have seen in the Left government’s actions during the Kanoria struggles a sellout to capitalists. But I reckon it was more than that. I do not think those who ran the government saw it necessarily as an act of selling out. Instead it was the logic of the machine that was taking over. Because the CPI(M)’s strategy was to actually eschew politicization and ideological divisions in favor of making the “system” run properly, they did not possibly see their stance as deriving from any ideological positions. They had a “system” to run and this “dispute”—like the proverbial cog in the wheel—was holding up the grand “system” from functioning smoothly: their task was to rectify the “glitch” as quickly as possible and get the juggernaut running again.

The secret both to CPI(M)’s success as well as its seeming betrayals lies in its machinic logic. Indeed Marxists in West Bengal describe their actions not as “*ami Marxism kori*” (I do Marxism) but rather as “*ami CPM kori*” (I do CPI(M)). The active verb is no longer the praxis of Marxism but rather fulfilling the ascribed organizational roles within a particular party machine.

Such a machinic logic and the inherent value of it in the eyes of the defenders of CPI(M)’s current politics is also seen in the way the latter continue to describe themselves as “the organized Left,” while all other parties—including the numerous highly organized far Left alternatives—are dismissed as the “unorganized Left.” It is as if there can be only one form of “organization”—coincident with one particular party—and even more dangerously, as if the mere fact of being “organized” is somehow excuse enough for bad politics. It is indeed ironic in the extreme that such a fetishization of the organization over praxis actualizes the very alienation of workers from their labor that Marx set out to demolish.

Marxism as ethnic identity

Just as the status-quoist logic of the ‘systems’ has become a fetish, so has the vocabulary of Marxism itself, which in Bengal is no longer a matter of revolutionary praxis. It has instead become a matter of ethnic identity and even chauvinism that does not necessarily need any specific actions or self-transformations. One does not need to question her prejudices or grapple with his own shortcomings of being a Bengali Marxist. One can simply *be* a Bengali Marxist. He or she can at the same time continue to be a bloodthirsty Hindu chauvinist, or a devout Muslim *mulla*, or refuse to marry off their daughter to her Scheduled Caste boyfriend.² Some even turn their Marxism into an icon of their prejudices. It is not rare to find a Bengali Marxist proudly proclaiming that, “BJP will never win in Bengal, they only win among the *Hindustanis* and the *Gujjus*.” The BJP’s poor performance in Bengal is seen to be a consequence of the essentially more “liberal” and “enlightened” outlook of the Bengalis. Ironically—despite their alleged liberal views—this “essentially liberal nature” does not usually extend to descriptions of Bengali Muslims.

Many a middle-class Bengali home is adorned by the pictures of Bengal’s great icons: Tagore, Netaji, Vivekananda, and Marx.³ These are things to be proud of, not necessarily to be acted on.

Just as following Tagore does not mean reading his books, following Vivekananda does not necessarily mean eating beef, building biceps, or reading the Gita, so too following Marxism does not necessarily mean believing in class struggle. One merely learns a handful of the more common songs of Tagore, becomes a member of Ramkrishna Mission (for Vivekananda’s sake), makes it a point to dislike Gandhi (for the sake of his opposition to Netaji), and votes for the CPI(M).

All these are markers of the contemporary Bengali *bhodorlok* identity, a social group which emerged in the nineteenth century. They were mostly a professional middle class but also had some minor interests in land. They were overwhelmingly drawn from the Hindu upper castes and emerged in the wake of the displacement of the traditional elite by the emerging British power. The group members were also the first to take to “Western” education (see e.g., Kopf 1979) and throughout the nineteenth century were engaged in many cultural, religious, and political reform movements. Though the occupations and caste/religious identity of the group have undergone some changes in the period then, they remain culturally and politically the hegemonic group in West Bengal. Various dominant cultural icons—often not mutually reconciled with ease—have been drawn from this complex history of the class. As a result, they have become our cultural capital, not our intellectual praxis. Atul Kohli (1990) has pointed out that this cultural identification is also reflected in the voting patterns in West Bengal. Non-Bengalis tend to look upon the CPI(M) as a Bengali party and therefore distance themselves from it, while Bengalis—particularly Bengali Hindus—for that very reason, tend to vote for them. My own experience, especially in student politics in Delhi, also bears out this contention.

Innumerable popular songs from contemporary artists such as Kabir Sumon, Nochiketa, and Chandrabindu, while celebrating the everyday life of the city of Calcutta refer to its radical politics and leftist sympathies. What these artists perceive with more acuity than academics is the ways in which Marxism has become a

part of Bengali cultural life. In so doing, however, it has often been reduced to the level of a fetishized facet of ethnic identity rather than a matter of critical reflection and praxis.

As a marker of difference this unique aspect of the Bengali *bhodorok* identity—their radicalism—could therefore with ease, in the wake of the Nandigram agitation, be pressed into the service of the CPI(M)’s campaign to delegitimize its opponents. The involvement of the Jammaat-e-Islami in the Nandigram issue—though the movement itself had clearly embraced both Hindus and Muslims—was easily represented as a plot by Islamist *mullas* who controlled the “essentially bigoted Muslim peasants.”⁴ The enlightened Marxist *bhodorok* thus had opposed the poor bigoted Muslim peasant.

Ignoring such obvious—though implicit—“communalism,” as the politics of religious sectarianism is called in South Asia, many defenders are heard saying that, “well, it is true—isn’t it? Bengal after all is not Gujarat and you must thank the CPI-M for that.”⁵ The fallacy in this argument lies in that—yes, Bengal is not Gujarat and Bhattacharya is not Modi,⁶ but how much of the credit goes to the CPI(M) and how much to the different political histories of the two regions? Bengal’s “radical” tradition goes much further back than the CPI(M). The success of the party was itself a story of the success of that tradition, not the other way round. CPI(M)’s success happened on the back of a long tradition of “revolutionary terrorism” of the early twentieth century and the immediate context of the Naxalite risings of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Though it would be impossible to go into detail here, this point is worth reiterating. The acceptance and success of communism at the ballot box in 1977 built on historical factors that went back—at least in certain aspects—to the nineteenth century. The rationality and criticality that had been introduced in *bhodorok* religious life in the middle of the nineteenth century by reformers like Rammohun Roy and the humanism and universalism found for instance in Tagore’s hugely influential oeuvre, all played a part in constituting a self-image for the *bhodorok* as a “rational,” “liberal” person. In

more material terms, the conjunction of land tenures and administrative policies created a context where many young men, though not actually impoverished, had to undertake liberal education as a means to eventually getting a job. From the beginning of the twentieth century the shrinkage and saturation of this job market created a significant group of discontented young men with a liberal education. Consequently, radical youth societies sprung up everywhere. These were mostly nationalist and usually had a religio-moral aspect to them. There were also some elements of social equality enshrined in these youth societies. After the 1947 partition of South Asia the huge dislocation and utter impoverishment of the displaced people further radicalized the Bengali youth, who already had readily available models of youth radicalism from a previous generation. This is not to underestimate the role of communist mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s, but merely to place it in its historical context. There is a tendency in radical, or even liberal, circles to often see the “positives” in a post-communist society as the legacy of communism, whereas the very fact that a communist mobilization had succeeded in these societies might also prove that these societies had already been more receptive to socially “progressive” agendas due to other, older elements in their histories.

However, just as the party inherited some of the “radicalism” from earlier movements, it also inherited some of the chronic limitations of those movements. Bengal’s “radical” traditions—even before Marxism—had a tinge of implicit neo-Hinduism to it. The “revolutionary terrorists” of the early twentieth century had more than a fair share of middle-class neo-Hinduism in their politics and their rhetoric, even though they claimed to represent the entirety of the Bengali people. Rajarshi Dasgupta argues that Bengali Marxism was always aligned to *madhyabitta* (middle class) sensibilities, but in radical poets like Samar Sen, “transgression [had continued to] figure in radical subjectivity” (Dasgupta 2005: 97). A vision of an apocalyptic revolution had continued to figure in the Bengali Marxist imaginary, thereby keeping alight the torch of self-

transgression and critical reflection. With the suppression of internal criticism and the adoption of a more centralized form of Marxism after the removal of PC Joshi as the general secretary of the undivided Communist Party of India in 1947, Dasgupta contends, this transgressive potential was quashed.⁷ In its place arose a "*madhyabitta* Marxism," where the middle-class could safely continue to be a Marxist without the need of transgressing the limitations of their own inherited prejudices.

But this *madhyabitta* Marxism is also a Bengali Hindu Marxism. Its lack of self-criticism, the fetishization of its own identity, and its machinic logic have therefore all been maturing for a long time. Of course the Hindu Bengali *madhyabitta*'s own historical situation itself has undergone (often dramatic) change throughout the course of the twentieth century and with this change have come changes to their sensibilities and consequent changes to the Marxism they espouse. The traumatic 1947 partition saw the sudden displacement and abject impoverishment of a massive section of the Bengali Hindu middle class. These refugees formed the backbone of radical Marxist politics in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, most of these refugee families—the bulk of whom had forcibly settled on land they did not own to the south of Calcutta—had once again "settled down." On the one hand, the electoral victory of the Left Front in the late 1970s had paved the way for many of these families to be given titles to the lands they had forcibly occupied since 1947. On the other hand, due to the persistent investment of these refugee families in educating their children—in fact schools were one of the first things the refugees built in the areas they settled—many of the next generation were able to get lucrative middle-class salaried jobs. Both these developments—as well as the host of other larger pan-Indian trends of liberalization, globalization, and so on—now muted the radicalism of the earlier generation and converted the bulk of the CPI(M)'s urban support base into a property-owning middle-class with its own distinctly status-quoist sensibilities. In the country-side, similarly, the early land-reforms instituted by

the CPI(M) removed the power of the old landlords and facilitated the rise of a new middle-peasantry, which now combined land-ownership, an interest in the wholesale trade of grain and access to governmental financial support through proximity to the party. This middle-peasantry thus came to share in time many of the status-quoist sensibilities of the ex-refugee urban support base of the party. Because CPI(M)'s Marxism in Bengal remained a reflection of predominantly Bengali, Hindu middle-class sensibilities, these shifts in the latter's sensibilities also shifted the accents of Bengali Marxism toward more status-quoist registers. A machinic logic prevented critical safeguards from operating to challenge this ossification of the party.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, there are many other factors that make Singur, Nandigram, Dobadi, and so on possible, but the crux of the matter for me lies embedded in the history of Marxism in general as well as the party in particular in the region.

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Notes

1. This is not so much an academic paper as a series of critical reflections; I interpret my personal experiences, using my professional training as a social scientist.
2. At the time of independence the constitutional fathers of India had recognized the reality and undesirability of the caste system. Incorporating the American idea of "affirmative action" or positive discrimination toward underprivileged groups, they had drawn up a "schedule" of certain castes who would be eligible for preferen-

- tial treatment in education and employment owing to the many social disadvantages under which they labored. In time members of these castes have come to be called by the generic name of “Scheduled Castes” and are often subject to negative social prejudices of the upper castes, not only due to their historically low status but also because of the preferential treatment they are now legally eligible to get.
3. Rabindranath Tagore was a great Bengali poet, who won the Nobel Prize for literature and is today the National Poet of Bangladesh. He has the distinction of having written the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh. Netaji or Subhas Chandra Bose was a leader of the Indian National Congress who had initially represented the young left wing within the Indian National Congress during the 1920s and 1930s. He eventually fell out with Gandhi who was opposed to Bose’s leftist inclinations. Eventually Bose was forced to quit the Congress. When World War II broke out, he decided to side with whoever was opposed to imperialist Britain and ended up aligning himself with the Axis powers. He raised an army comprised of Indian soldiers in the British Army taken prisoner by Japan in the Eastern Front and tried to invade British India with this army to liberate it. Vivekananda was a Hindu monk, who sought to reinterpret Hinduism, thereby modernizing and organizing it. He also toured the world giving lectures, presenting Hinduism to the audiences of the West as a spiritual alternative fully compatible with modern life but also promising an escape from the narrow materialism of contemporary life. Many right-wing Hindu political configurations of today have built on Vivekananda’s visions of Hinduism.
 4. The Jamaat was founded in Lahore in British India in 1941 by Sayyid Abdul Ala Maududi. Its aim was to affect an orthodox Islamic revolution in South Asia through peaceful means. Today sister organizations under the same name exist in all post-colonial states of South Asia. Particularly in India, where Muslims are in a minority and many are socially and economically disadvantaged, the Jamaat’s politics is often in line with the interests of the poor, though it remains couched in a religious idiom.
 5. The western Indian state of Gujarat has in recent years repeatedly elected a right-wing BJP government led by the hawkish Narendra Modi. In 2002 massive violence broke out throughout the state in which a disproportionate number of Muslims were killed and it is widely believed that Modi had used his office to deploy the state machinery to attack or at least allow the massacre of Muslims to take place.
 6. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Narendra Modi are the chief ministers of West Bengal and Gujarat, respectively.
 7. Puran Chand Joshi was a leading Indian communist in the 1930s and 1940s. He had been tried by the British government in the notorious Meerut conspiracy case and sent to the penal colony in the Andamans. As the Communist Party of India’s first general secretary he guided it through its most formative years. His advocacy of closer ties with the Indian National Congress under the leadership of the socialist-minded Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru after independence made him unpopular to the more militant young members of the party and led to his exit from the leadership. In his later years he devoted himself to developing archives of Indian communism at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

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