

Letter from West Bengal Disorder Brewing, Ruling Class Parties Losing Their Grip

— by a correspondent

West Bengal, which achieved the ruling class 'glory' of becoming a very peaceful and calm state and has been maintaining this qualification, is now in the process of losing that calm. The symptoms of unrest and disorder can be seen in different walks of life. Though, in the last two decades of 'Left Front' rule under the leadership of the CPI(M), West Bengal has not witnessed any broad-based mass political movement with revolutionary potential, still the objective conditions for development of unrest and disorder have been there in this state for long.

Of all the states of India, West Bengal tops the list in the number of closed factories. This has been so for more than two decades now. Moreover, a considerable section of the running factories are not in a good state, i.e., the numbers of their employees are decreasing and there is no development programme for these factories in the near future. From the 1960s onward, the basic industries of West Bengal have been allowed to deteriorate. And no big industry worth the name, employing thousands of employees, has come up. Only a few industries with 'high-tech' were installed in these decades. But the number of employees in these concerns is so small compared with the huge invested capital in them that the installation of these industries did not raise much hope in the minds of the workers and employees of West Bengal. Besides, the government of West Bengal has been trying its utmost to lure the Indian big bourgeoisie and the multinationals to invest in West Bengal, casting aside the political pronouncements of the Left Front parties. However, these efforts have

failed to yield significant results for the workers. So there is a general mood of frustration in the minds of the workers and the employees of West Bengal.

The condition of the workers in the unorganised sector is worse than that in the organised sector. The overwhelming majority of workers and employees of West Bengal, as elsewhere, are in the unorganised sector. More and more workers and employees in this category are being pressurised to work under more and more stringent conditions. In many concerns they are being pressurised to work far more than eight hours a day. One other fact is revealing. In many concerns the workers and employees work at a rate lower than the minimum rate fixed by the government.

If we look towards the rural life we can see that the condition of the peasants, especially the landless and poor peasants, has been deteriorating. Even the middle peasants are not in a condition to maintain their livelihood. They are being compelled to sell their produce at low prices. Distress-sale has become a normal part of their lives.

In such miserable conditions came this year the devastating flood, mainly in the northern districts of Maldah, West Dinajpur, etc. Simultaneously, drought was seen in the southern districts of West Bengal. The flood in Maldah this year was the severest of this century and the flood in the northern districts to a large extent destroyed the jute, rice and silk-worm crops. The flood and drought together have damaged the economy of West Bengal, the most hard-hit by these are the landless and poor peasants.

West Bengal surpasses all other states in unemployment. Moreover, there is no hope, no ray of light for the common youth. Only the youth belonging to the upper echelons to some extent 'accepted' the campaign that a lot of jobs would be created for them by means of modern technology, eg computers, etc. But now it is becoming more and more clear to them too that this campaign was nothing but a hoax.

This is the story of the exploited classes. On the other side of the fence is the steady and rapid flourishing of the big industrialists and the village gentry.

The big bourgeoisie have been making money with such little difficulty, as they probably never dreamt of previously in West Bengal. The main political leadership which organised the workers and employees in their struggle against the big bourgeoisie at one time have now joined

hands with them. In connivance with these degenerate leaders the big bourgeoisie have been usurping the provident funds, gratuity, etc. of the workers. In these two decades, their profits have known no bounds.

Along with the flourishing of the big industrial houses a new category of moneymakers have emerged in the urban centres of West Bengal. They are termed 'promoters'. These promoters, in league with corrupt political leaders and officials, have been making money by means of promoting various multi-storeyed buildings unscrupulously.

Similar things are happening in rural Bengal also. There, the panchayats are becoming centres of corruption and power for the village gentry. The village gentry and the corrupt political leaders, joining hands, have been utilising the funds meant for the development of the rural areas, for their own benefit. This type of corruption became rampant even in the flood-hit areas this year.

In the context of the contention between the exploited and the exploiters, the position of the middle class of West Bengal has certain special features. The middle class of West Bengal is an important factor till now in determining the politics of West Bengal. The upper section of this class, to which the main bulk of the influential section of the intelligentsia belongs, is today in a much better financial condition. Under the Left Front rule, this section has attained a more advantageous position than under any previous rule. Mainly in this section are also the party-members and supporters of CPI(M) and other parties; these have managed to improve their lot in the last two decades. Thus the middle-class is being divided into two. As an economic category the middle class as a whole belongs to the exploited classes. But the upper section of it, i.e. the wealthier and more influential section, has been going more and more over to the side of the establishment and the other section is being driven more and more towards impoverishment.

In this context, the recent announcement of the closure of 64 factories of Eastern Coalfield Limited (ECL) and of eight other public sector enterprises has agitated workers and employees. Around one lakh workers and employees are to lose their jobs. All the established trade unions and parties have taken up this issue in an anti-Central government stand.

In the jute industry, which is one of the most important industries of West Bengal, there is at this moment no important movement as could be seen a few years ago. Yet the seeming "peace" at present is unlikely to

last. The condition may worsen in the near future itself because the price of raw jute has increased sharply this year. And already the owners have threatened that they will not pay the variable D.A. to workers.

In such an atmosphere has arisen the problem of the recent abnormal price-hike. People of West Bengal have become more or less accustomed to the general rise of prices of essential commodities. But the sudden and unbelievable rate of price-rise recently has shaken the very foundations of the people's livelihood. The rate of rise in prices of onions, potatoes, mustard oil, rice and flour is unprecedented in the history of West Bengal's economy. Lives of workers, employees and the rural poor have become simply unbearable. This enormous price-rise has also hit the upper section of the middle class and intelligentsia.

The present price-rise has laid bare the incompetence and impotence of both the Left Front government and the Central government. This aggravates the disorder and corruption that have already riddled the machinery of the Left Front government. The crudest example is to be seen in the sharp spurt in dacoities in Calcutta and its suburbs, and the collusion in these dacoities of a section of the police officials, which is more or less open.

Already, in the press, the food movement of 1966 and "Dum Dum Dawai" of 1967 are being referred to. Actually the food movement of 1966 was the biggest movement West Bengal has seen. This movement played an important role in overthrowing the Congress rule from West Bengal and in driving large sections into revolutionary Marxism in West Bengal. 'Dum Dum Dawai' is a movement in which the hoarders were gheraoed and compelled to sell commodities at reasonable prices. The movement sprang up in Dum Dum, very near Calcutta and within a few days spread to different corners of West Bengal.

The role of the parliamentary parties

What is the role of the established parliamentary parties in the context of this alarming situation?

The established parties here in West Bengal are the Trinamul Congress (TMC), Congress, BJP and the CPI(M)-led Left Front. All of them are well aware of the deteriorating situation of West Bengal. Moreover, the puja festival, in which the working people temporarily drown their sorrow and misery, especially in the urban centres of West Bengal, is now

over. So now the political parties are thinking of unleashing some political programmes to rejuvenate their cadres. They have two purposes. One purpose is to utilise the situation in favour of their particular party and the other is to thwart the initiative of the people towards developing a genuine democratic movement which can pave the path for the revitalisation of revolutionism in West Bengal.

Mamata Banerjee tried to surpass others by starting an agitation against the government on the question of eviction of some residents from an old building in Calcutta, immediately after the puja holidays were over. This led to a clash between Mamata and the police. Her supporters started a vigorous campaign proclaiming that she had been shot by the police and started stopping buses, trains, etc. in all the urban areas surrounding Calcutta, which virtually came to a standstill. In this way, a huge commotion was created out of a relatively minor local issue. It did not click so much. So Mamata had to resort to the much-awaited anti-price-rise programme. She started raising her voice in this regard against the performance of both Central and state governments. She even resigned from the "Co-ordination Committee" of the alliance parties at the Centre even while assuring that she would not withdraw support to the BJP government. But from the recently held demonstrations and rallies one thing is clear. The wave of the TMC was developing has lost much of its strength.

As for the Congress, it is very difficult for it to recover from the internal feuds through which it has been passing. The history of the Congress of West Bengal in the last two decades is actually the history of a power-struggle among different groups and individuals. The basis of Congress politics in the last two decades has always been blunt anti-CPI(M)-ism and this anti-CPI(M) feeling had been drawn away by Mamata Banerjee to a large extent. So, when news of an 'understanding' among Sonia Gandhi-Harkishen Singh Surjeet-Jyoti Basu got propagated in the media, it became very difficult for the Congress leaders of West Bengal to make the cadres digest it.

When an MP from BJP got elected in the last parliamentary election in West Bengal, defeating CPI(M) candidates, the name of BJP came to the fore in the political scenario of West Bengal. But it is clear to the local people that two factors were responsible for this 'success' of BJP in this Left Front-dominated state. One factor is the internal rivalry in this constituency between two groups of the CPI(M) itself. The rivalry was so

intense that one group played an active role in defeating the candidate of CPI(M) belonging to the other group. The other factor was the alliance of BJP with TMC, under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. Actually, BJP has not a strong base in West Bengal: BJP has been exploiting political backwardness, communal feelings, etc. among the working people. Moreover, the role of the BJP government in the Centre for the last few months has taken away much of its credibility. At this moment, particularly, ordinary people are becoming more and more critical of the BJP.

Now let us consider the role of the CPI(M) and other Left Front parties — CPI, Forward Bloc, RSP, etc.

The problem of CPI(M), which is the largest and most organised party in West Bengal, is different. The 16th Party Congress was held in the month of October 1998 in Calcutta, with much fanfare. But this Party Congress of CPI(M) virtually emerged as the congress of supporting the Congress. And it came out clearly in the Party Congress that the majority of the members from West Bengal could not accept the line of supporting Congress at the Centre. Also, the so-called 'historic blunder' uttered by Jyoti Basu, in connection with the event of not being allowed to become the Prime Minister of India, was outvoted. The party here actually came out divided. Not only that, in some places, now, party-cadres of contending groups are openly at logger-heads with each other. In a few places they have gone to the extent of engaging themselves in holding public meetings, circulating leaflets, inviting the police against the rival group, etc. So, the condition of the CPI(M) is going towards disarray, degeneration and disintegration. As a result the party cannot move in one tune on issues like price rise. Already, one step taken by some of the CPI(M) in the direction of 'Dumdum dawai', ie in the direction of pressuring the hoarders to sell the commodities at reasonable prices, was turned down by other leaders. And Jyoti Basu and Buddhadev Bhattacharya lost no time in threatening people not to take the law into their own hands in this regard. But a large section of party-cadres are also suffering from this abnormal price-rise. So, in some places, the party-cadres have started agitating on their own against the hoarders and black marketeers.

About the other Left Front parties, one important point is that RSP and Forward Bloc clearly declared their position with regard to the CPI(M)'s policy of supporting Congress at the Centre. They are very much against this. And also in the question of price-rise CPI is vocal

about the policy of the Left Front government also, though their main direction of attack is on the BJP government at the Centre.

All these parties are, in general, deteriorating and degenerating in West Bengal.

In all, Left Front parties cannot attract the people in their struggle against the price rise, unemployment, closure of factories, etc., which are the basic issues of the people of West Bengal at present. Parties such as the TMC, the BJP, or the Congress can create some disturbance and foment some anti-CPI(M) feelings only and pave the path for unrest and disorder. They are destined to proceed towards that. CPI(M)-led Left Front will try to put all the blame on the BJP government at the Centre. This may also help to create unrest and disorder.

Actually, all the established parliamentary parties are losing such grip as they had over the masses, and their activities may only aggravate unrest and disorder.

The efforts by the communist revolutionaries

Let us have a look at the movement of the communist revolutionaries of West Bengal, who have been trying to organise the people for many years.

In West Bengal, all the communist revolutionary groups of all-India character have their organisations. Moreover, there are many other communist revolutionary groups, circles and individuals, who have been working mainly within the boundaries of West Bengal or within a certain limited region or sector.

Though very slowly, a polarisation is taking place in the communist revolutionary movement. The communist revolutionaries here are being polarised into three broad categories. One category is more and more moving towards parliamentarism; the political activities of these groups run mainly according to the parliamentary politics. They have more or less adjusted to that and are more and more giving way to the parliamentary cretinism and taking great pains to find the 'positive role' and contribution of CPI(M) and other Left Front parties. Another section of communist revolutionaries is virtually at the opposite end. They have been pursuing the line of individual heroism, without taking proper lessons from the left-deviationist mistakes of the 1970s. The followers of this line have been pursuing that old line, only in some new modified form. Most

of the followers of this line try to bank on the support of the youth with the stories of the heroic struggles of their comrades with rifles in their hands.

Now, even the communist revolutionaries who have been fighting both these left and right deviations have not been able to come together on their respective positions and put an alternative before the people. They have also not been able to project a sustainable leadership to the masses.

Nevertheless, there are also certain positive developments at the level of mass activity which should be noted. Here, we are citing two important examples where, though the issues are of a general democratic character, collective efforts of different communist revolutionary and individuals, along with the democratic-minded people, have proceeded successfully in the direction of projecting an alternative to the people.

The first effort was on the campaign against atomic weapons and the second was on the agitation over the flood in West Bengal, in the context of recent devastating flood.

Just after the atomic explosion a few science organisations came together and started campaigning against it and tried to bring all the forces under one banner. With much pains and strenuous efforts the ideological-political differences were sorted out and a few united points were chalked out. A considerable number of organisations which participated in this move were influenced by the communist revolutionaries directly or indirectly. The two main slogans were: (1) "We want a nuclear-free world", and (2) "We are against the atomic explosions of India and Pakistan". The name of this united platform became "Paramanu Astra-Virodhi Prachar Aviyani" (Campaign against Atomic Weapons). Also, the line of action to be pursued was ascertained. "Prachar Aviyani" had the objective of organising a big and attractive procession on August 6 commemorating Hiroshima Day. In this programme also joined more than 100 small and big organisations and also some reputed personalities. It was decided that each organisation can have its own banner and slogans. In this move organisations of different shades participated and almost all communist revolutionaries joined.

In the meantime, CPI(M) took notice of this development and, with a view to disrupting the movement and furthering their own electoral game of doing something against the Central government of BJP, it framed up a '6th August Committee'. The names of a few well-known intellectuals

were put up and the party bosses kept the strings of the move in their own hands.

On behalf of the 'Prachar Aviyan', on the other hand, attempts were made seriously to unitedly observe this Black Day. But was in vain. So, on 6th August, two processions with similar-looking issues appeared on the streets of Calcutta. One was organised by the CPI(M) and sponsored by the West Bengal government, and was consequently very large. The other was organised by different democratic organisations, was more consistent in content, and had anti-establishment feelings. Its size was smaller but in enthusiasm, vigour, seriousness and spirit the smaller procession surpassed the larger one. It is interesting that even a few organisations that were to join the '6th August Committee'-sponsored procession, joined the procession of 'Prachar Aviyan' for some time before joining their official procession. The number of participants in the procession of 'Prachar Aviyan' was around six to seven thousand.

It was previously decided that 'Prachar Aviyan' would be wound up after the 6th August programme. But in the review-meeting after 6th August the decision was cancelled by each and every one. All who spoke were in favour of continuing the organisation and it has been continuing.

The main reason for this enthusiasm was the feeling amongst the constituents that in spite of many differences and discrepancies, there were some positive grounds for united action. This positive feeling has been achieved through a strenuously pursued democratic approach.

The next is the example of 'Banya Tran O Pratirodh Samanyaya Manch' (Co-ordination Platform for Flood Relief and Resistance), which came into being after the devastating flood this year. The positive feeling achieved through the 'Prachar Aviyan' had an impact in the creation of this 'Samanyaya Mancha' and a section of the organisations of the 'Prachar Aviyan' also participated in 'Samanyaya Mancha'.

It was clear to everyone that the flood in West Bengal is mainly man-made and that a long-drawn-out struggle has to be undertaken in the direction of prevention of flood. So, the decisions taken were as follows:

(1) On behalf of 'Samanyaya Mancha' direct relief-work would be organised in the flood-hit areas:

(2) Steps would be taken to demand from the government a permanent solution to the problem, because it was exposed in the discussions that scientific and pro-people outlook was clearly absent in the preparation of

dams, barrage etc and in the drainage system of West Bengal and that the government had wilfully disregarded the necessary measures in this direction.

The volunteers of the 'Mancha' have been enthusiastically participating in collecting funds, relief materials, medicines and giving those to the flood-hit areas. From these experiences the corruption of the established parliamentary parties, especially the CPI(M), and the administration, and so the callousness of the government became clear. But at the same time, the initiative and sacrifice of many organisations and individuals became known. Particularly, the experience concerning the heroic struggle of common people in combating flood, inspired the 'Mancha'.

This happened in Chapra region of Nadia district and at a distance of about 130 to 140 km from Calcutta. The people of this locality protected about 127 villages from the devastation of flood through their determination, indomitable courage, and uninterrupted united labour. About seven to eight thousand people worked together in mending the old barrages and making newer ones on the river Jalangi. People worked there for about 15 days at a stretch and almost 24 hours a day. They took initiative into their own hands. They worked on the basis of their own experience regarding the flow of the river Jalangi and defied the suggestions of the government officials of the irrigation department. They themselves collected the materials for making the barrages from the villagers. The materials were bamboos, bags full of soil, corrugated tin, etc. Moreover, they pressurised and compelled the local Block Development Officer to help with these types of materials for the construction of the barrages. *The most important thing was that they worked in unison, without any sectarianism. This mood has been uncommon in West Bengal of late, and hence is important to note.*

This 'Mancha' has been trying side by side to collect and organise opinions of the river-experts, scientists and the experiences of the common people of the flood-prone regions with the long-term plan of locating the main causes of flood and building up a movement to force the government to act according to the objective scientific need, so that floods can be prevented in future.

At present, the 'Mancha' is going to organise a convention. In that convention many eminent scientists, river-experts and representatives from different flood-hit areas are expected to participate. Organisations of dif-

ferent shades from different areas of West Bengal will also join this programme.

The main driving force in these two successful movements has been the cohesive effort of a few communist revolutionary organisations. Their cohesive attempts acted as a cementing factor. Moreover, the democratic process of discussion, debate and efforts to find out the common minimum programme in contradistinction to the programme of the parliamentary parties, acted as a very powerful factor in these united actions. But only a section of the communist revolutionaries took initiative in these efforts, and many remain outside the orbit, though they may not be opposed to these.

These are, after all, examples of positive activities. But heartening though the response from the different revolutionary groups and from the common people has been on such democratic issues, upto now, on endemic *basic* questions of the people in the state, the communist revolutionaries have failed in unleashing a movement on the problem of price-rise, closure of factories, unemployment, and the agrarian question, which is the cry of the hour.

West Bengal is proceeding more and more towards unrest and disorder. Violence may erupt in many places at any moment. Parliamentary parties are losing their grip over the masses; indeed, their activities can only promote disorder. Suffering of the people has become the order of the day in West Bengal. So, unrest and disorder will help in breaking the ice of this intolerable suffering if the communist revolutionaries grasp the tasks and prepare themselves to organise the people.

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"Bengal for speedy FDI clearance"

"West Bengal's industry and commerce minister Bidyut Ganguly has suggested that Chief Ministers be empowered to sanction foreign direct investment in their states. Addressing an interactive session with corporates organised by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industries here on Friday, Ganguly said there were five investors who had shown interest in West Bengal, but they were getting impatient as approvals had not been granted for over a year-and-a-half.

"He said the exit policy should be rephrased as the term itself had a negative connotation. In reality, trade unions, labour and the Government accept payment in lieu of termination of jobs as a better option than plain loss of salaries."

- Business Standard November 23, 1998