

Book Reviews

**Chandan Basu, *Radical Ideology and ‘Controlled Politics’:
CPI and the History of West Bengal- 1947-1964,*
Alphabet Books, Kolkata, 2015, Rs 475/-**

Communist movement in India has always been a very fascinating area of research to the scholars of different persuasions for understandable reasons. Numerous research initiatives have been taken up so far to understand the different facets of the role of the Communist Party of India (CPI) during pre-independence era and particularly in the freedom movement of the country. But there is definitely a dearth of scholarly literature on the role of CPI in the post-independence days in India in general and West Bengal in particular. Although so many journalistic accounts are there; there is a lack of systematic handling of the developments in this regard and it has left an important research gap in this area of knowledge. The book under review attempted to mend the void in its own way.

The specific period 1947-1964 undertaken for the study is very much remarkable from both ends as the beginning marked the commencement of the India's journey as a new "Nation" and the closing year saw the formal split of the Communist movement of India and the birth of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Elaborating the importance of the research area, the author himself noted that 15th August, 1947 marks something more than mere 'transfer of power' from the hands of the British rulers to the Indians. It is significant both in the context of the enormous sacrifices of the Indian people in their struggle for independence and also in view of the fact that it marks the very beginning of a new era of the 'nation-building' in India. The author also reminded us of the 'other side' of the picture, as we all know that our independence was coincided with the bifurcation of the country on religious lines, and consequently it was also a kind of 'other time'—rather a 'difficult time'—in view of partition and large scale migration/exodus—

from 'East to West' and "West to East". Be it noted that, with the bifurcation of the country, Bengal Province was also divided; and it was through the process the state of West Bengal under the Indian Union came into being ; and that the political situation in the newly emerged West Bengal went through a tumultuous scenario and the political forces, including the CPI, had to tackle the 'new situation' and decide their tasks anew, albeit in their own way. With a very clear vision of the newness of the developments of the post-independence period, both from an all Indian perspectives as well as the specificities of the West Bengal scenario, the author tried "to understand the role of the communist and leftist movements in the history of West Bengal."

Another dimension of the work relates to the context in which the Communist Party of India (CPI) joined parliamentary politics in the country after initial hesitation. Anybody having some idea of the very nature of inner party ideological debate on the issue of parliamentary participation during pre-independence days may remember interesting shifts in party position in this regard. In the post-independence era, however, the mainstream communist party/parties adopted a theoretical formulation highlighting the need for utilising the 'democratic institutions' to supplement their own extra-parliamentary courses of action and joined parliamentary politics right from the first general election held in 1952. As such, the 'parliamentary left' in India used the prevalent democratic institutions to create conditions for the fulfilment of their professed political goals, viz the establishment of a new India devoid of class exploitation. Subsequently, however, the Leninist doctrine of the 'revolutionary party of the

proletariat' acquired new meaning for the 'Indian Left' in the process of handling the levers of powers at the state level and also influence politics at the national level for a considerable period of time. The process began with the formation of the first communist ministry in Kerala in 1957 and numerous developments unfolded over the years. As the study delimits itself for the period 1947-1964, the impact of the whole gamut of the changing political scenario did not reflect in the study. But, the author reasonably identified the emergence of a form of 'controlled politics' vis-à-vis 'revolutionary ideology' within the ambit of communist movement in India. As the 'parliamentary left' in India, in the post-independence days, instead of emphasising their 'revolutionary programmes', were more interested in handling governments at the state and local levels with their 'immediate goals' of 'development with redistribution', the very nature of the left politics has undergone profound changes. In spite of the fact that the changes indicated became more prominent in the post 1977 period and the book focusses developments during 1947-64, one may get some earlier trends in this regard from the research undertaken by the author. Thus, in a sense, the book contributes in understanding the role of the left political forces in India's predominantly liberal politics with its 'radical ideology' and 'revolutionary party-structure'. As such, an apparent contradiction crept in and the area of research became very interesting.

The Book is divided into five chapters including *Introduction* and *Conclusion*. In the introductory chapter, besides stating the objectives of the study and defining "the time span, limits, types of sources and nature of data, method of analysis and conceivable hypotheses", the author elaborated the remarkable 'Post-colonial Entry-Point'-s for India in general and its implications for the Indian communists in particular. Among the other important chapters, the first one (Chapter 2) entitled *The Marxist Theory of Party formation : Reconsidering Lenin and Mao* may be considered as very important addition as it provided us with a theoretical back-up to understand the specific nature of the party

officially committed to a 'revolutionary' programme. The author has ably summed up the views of Lenin and Mao in this regard. Emphasising upon a kind of 'regimentation' involving in the Leninist doctrine, the author might have tried to establish a theoretical link between revolutionary ideology and 'controlled' politics. Even if it is true, it is very much noteworthy in this connection that the author did not miss the 'democratic' essence in the formulation of the principle of 'democratic centralism' as well as the historical constraints over it both from within and without. Keeping in view the very nature of 'self-critical struggle' as an integral part of the Marxist-leninist parties to ensure democracy, the author summed up the evolutionary features of this kind of radical politics. The chapter would have been richer and more informative however if some other Marxist insights, particularly the dissenting voices, were considered and the fruits of subsequent researches were included.

The next two Chapters, entitled *Mapping History and Politics: Communism in Indian Perspectives-1947-1964* and *CPI and the Political Perspectives of West Bengal-1947-1964* constitute the main body of the thesis. Chapter 3 provides the historical and political backdrop in which the CPI took shape and developed. Highlighting the dramatic changes in Indian politics, including the rise of Gandhian leadership and the emergence of 'mass politics' as well as the problems involving "the enormous diversity of India in regard to culture, religion, languages, ethnicity etc", the author tried to identify the problem areas for the communist movement in India. The added factors relate to the contradiction between 'national' and 'international' responsibilities of the party, understanding the specificities of the Indian situation and its differences with Soviet experiences, questions involving shifting positions of the Comintern etc. The author summed up the relevant factors in a very able manner so as to contextualise the problems of party formation in India. The thorny question of Congress-Communist relationship was also given due importance in this regard

Chapter 4 focussed on the political perspectives of

West Bengal for the period under study. Beginning with the interpretations of the Indian communists particularly in regard to the very nature of the 'truncated independence', it highlights the crisis in the communist movement in India . Concentrating on West Bengal, it took a brief note on the review of the labour and peasant movements immediately before and after independence. The shift in the party's political and ideological programme and its consequences were dealt with at length and from the account one may get a clear picture of the historical background of West Bengal under which a kind of 'controlled 'politics took shape within a broad canvas of radical ideology. Notable in this context is the use of primary sources some of which are quoted directly from vernacular sources and are not translated.

The concluding chapter seems to be a bit more interesting as it has given a sub-title "Re-questioning

the Limits of Perspectives". It may mean many things to many people. But, to the author, apart from a summary of the findings, it added some observations, in a rather unusual manner, which may be found very important in initiating further studies in this regard. The observation relating to the social roots of the left as 'plebian rather than patrician', the perceptions regarding the class-basis of the movements led by the party, the findings on the limitations of the party in regard to the representation of the Women, dalits, minorities etc are noteworthy in this connection. Finally, the author came out with some concluding remarks stating the reasons for the success of the parliamentary left in providing an alternative platform of action in modern Bengal all along the period under study.

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