

INTERVIEW WITH SURJYO KANTA MISHRA

## *Political Repression in West Bengal Today*

The Left movement in West Bengal – the most powerful contingent of the Left movement in India – today faces intense repression by the State Government led by the Trinamul Congress (TMC) and by the ruling classes in general. **Surya Kanta Mishra**, member of the Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), holds the two crucial positions of Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and Secretary of the State Committee of the CPI(M). Dr Mishra gave this interview on the state of political repression in West Bengal to **Madhav Tipu Ramachandran** on May 19, 2015. The interview was conducted over three hours, during a journey by car from Kolkata to Nadia. In the interview, Dr Mishra speaks on what he characterises as a three-pronged attack on democracy and the people in West Bengal, an attack whose victims go beyond the Left and Left parties; on the attack on Left forces in the State; on comparing the current repression with the period of semi-fascist terror in the State in the 1970s; and on the need and prospects for a resurgence of the Left in the State and in India.

MTR: *What is the nature of political repression in West Bengal today?*

SKM: The repression that we have been facing in West Bengal today, four years after the changing of the government, is a multi-pronged one. There have been three types of attack against the people of the State: first, an attack on democracy and democratic institutions; secondly, an attack on peoples' livelihoods, and thirdly, an attack on secularism in the State.

Concurrently, there has been a concerted and violent attack on the CPI(M) and the Left Front.

MTR: *What has the Left had to confront?*

SKM: Around 170 comrades have been killed during this period. More importantly, thousands of comrades have been brutally attacked and denied hospital treatment, their complaints have not been registered, and many of them — more than 5000 by my estimate — will be physically handicapped for the rest of their lives.

More than 1500 offices of the Party, the Left Front and mass organisations have been attacked, and either captured and converted to Trinamul Congress (TMC) offices or put under lock and key.

More than 100,000 comrades have been implicated in false cases.

Many people have been forced out of their places of residence, more than 51,000 at the last count. When people return to their places of residence after a certain period of time, say one or two years, they are not allowed to speak to anyone, not allowed to leave their houses, their mobile phones and landlines are taken away, and they are not even allowed to drop letters into a post box. They are forced to pay fines to goondas, often to the tune of several lakhs. (our estimate is that Rs 50 crores have been taken in total by means of extortion in the State)

MTR: *How does the extortion take place?*

SKM: The money is taken after threats and leaving no paper trail, although we do have a few documents. Where persons who have been forced to leave their home do not return, members of their families are sometimes tortured. The goons say: "Tell him (or her) to come back, live here, pay the fine; send him (or her) the message that otherwise their family will not be allowed to live here in peace."

MTR: *You described the first kind of attack as on democracy and democratic institutions.*

SKM: What I have described is part of the larger attack on the forces of democracy in society.

It is said that in parliamentary democracy, the House belongs to the Opposition, that is, the Opposition must take the lead in addressing issues within the Legislature. In West Bengal, we publish an account every year of how many questions we asked, how many remained unanswered, how our adjournment motions were rejected, how no time was spent on non-official discussion and non-official resolutions, how resolutions were passed solely by the Government — no one else — and how our resolutions were thrown out.

The Press Corner in the Assembly is no longer open to the Leader of Opposition when the House is not in session.

MTR: *What exactly is the Press Corner?*

SKM: During our time in Government, we organised that a Press Corner be opened, in order that any member of the House be able to meet the Press and discuss policies and open issues to debate. As a Government, we believed in keeping ourselves accountable to the people via the Press. We used to regularly go to the Press Corner and discuss our policies.

The Press Corner usually has to close by 5 p.m., and one day, a few months after the new Government had come to power, an accusation was levelled against me to the effect that I had exceeded the deadline by five minutes. Although I am sure that I did not overstep the time limit, even if I had, it is hardly cause to close the Press Corner to the Leader of Opposition. They have closed down the Press Corner for three and a half years now, and whenever the Assembly is not in session, I have to arrange Press Conferences in the street outside (although I can, of course, hold them in the Party office as well). Ministers can hold press conferences in their offices, but ordinary MLAs of any political party should have the right to speak out to the press, which is why the Press Corner was built in the first place.

MTR: *There have been other incidents in the Legislative Assembly.*

SKM: These are manifestations of the new regime. When we moved an adjournment motion in the house for a discussion about the Sarada chit fund scam, a few of our MLAs were beaten up and injured inside the House by ruling party MLAs. The injured included a woman, Debalina Hembram, a former Minister, who was thrown between bench and desk in the Treasury benches. The other injured MLA, Gauranga Chatterjee, our State Committee member, sustained a fracture in the skull, but the government hospital to which he was admitted said that there was no injury, and refused to admit him. He was then admitted to a private hospital and the CT scan he undertook subsequently revealed his fracture clearly. Nothing further could be done about this, for if something happens within the House, the Police will not take action and so nothing was done.

Thus, even the legislature, which is said to be the place where the Government in a parliamentary democracy is accountable to the people, has failed to discharge its constitutional responsibilities.

MTR: *Are these attacks directed solely at the Left?*

SKM: No, the attacks that were first aimed at us are now aimed at the entire Opposition — as well as at members of the ruling party itself. I told the Chief Minister that at least 50 people of her party have been killed by her own people, and I believe they do not even have a record of them.

The historical experience is that when the attack on democracy begins, nobody is spared, not even members of the ruling party. In the chit fund case, TMC MPs and other ruling party loyalists are now being disowned or being forced to leave by the party as its leaders believe that these people may have divulged sensitive information to the CPI(M), or to the courts or police.

MTR: *What about other democratic institutions?*

SKM: All of them are under considerable pressure. The local bodies and all the authority they had are under attack. Elections are rigged, people outside the ruling party are not allowed to submit nominations, and even if they do manage to submit them, are then forced to withdraw their candidatures. Co-operatives

are similarly besieged (have been “captured”) – no elections are held, and they are run by “administrators.” There is no campus democracy for students or teachers. Student elections are under attack, and the right of students to form unions denied. The right of workers to strike has been taken away.

Other democratic organisations, such as the constitutional bodies, are under attack. There is no Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission (HRC), because when the Commission delivered certain judgements or recommendations unpalatable to the government, they found a way to remove its Chairman. Thereafter, they appointed the former Director General to the HRC, an appointment that I opposed as a member of the Selection Committee. I stated that never has a police officer with several human rights violations *sub judice* been appointed to a Human Rights Commission. He now acts as *de facto* Chairman of the Commission – which is a reflection the state of human rights in our State.

The State Election Commission has not been spared either, as the government’s war with the State Election Commission on the issue of holding panchayat elections showed. A Sessions Court judge has had to come to us for safety and security, which shows that there are members of the judiciary who are under personal threat. The Central Bureau of Investigation has had to ask the High Court to transfer the case out of Alipore court, since they did not expect justice from the Alipore court.

MTR: *You described the second kind of attack as being one on people’s livelihoods.*

SKM: People are denied wages after working on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, denied work when funds are available, and sometimes denied employment on the basis of political loyalty, anyone but a supporter of the ruling party being unacceptable for employment. Wages are sometimes withheld for six months or even a year, thus violating the terms of the law.

Farmers are not paid the procurement prices declared by the Government, and mechanisms for output procurement are not in place. The agrarian situation is deteriorating every day. There have been farmer suicides in West Bengal, as had not occurred in the 34 years of Left Front rule preceding the period in power of this Government.

MTR: *Are the issues of livelihoods singularly issues of rural areas?*

SKM: No, in recent times, the industrial sphere has been characterised by closures in traditional sectors (for example in the tea and jute industries) and in other sectors, and by a failure to start new industries. People are thrown out of employment because factories are being closed and because of the hooliganism of the ruling party in the factory sector. Today’s newspaper says that the Chief Minister has announced that seven jute factories are to reopen. These mills had become unviable and unable to function because hooligans of the ruling party had demanded ever greater amounts of money as extortion. The Chief Minister has ultimately had to ask them to see that the factories reopen. A temporary change in the situation does not, however, reflect what is happening every day everywhere else; her words in this case are nothing more than lip service, with nothing actually changing in the field.

Members of the business community have begun to complain that they are unable to run businesses because they have to pay this ‘extortion fee’. The insurance scheme that we introduced while in Government has not been implemented properly. The Government is not paying the premium amount to which it is committed, and a sum of to Rs 69-70 crores has been left unpaid by the government in the last four years (a substantial proportion of this relates to crop insurance). Government employees and teachers have not been paid their dearness allowance; up to 48 per cent — a proportion almost unheard of — of their wages remain unpaid, and the failure to pay wages now affects around a million people.

MTR: *You described the “third prong” of the attack as being on secularism.*

SKM: There has never been any serious incident of communal tension in this State since Partition. During the 34 years of Left Front rule, whenever there was communal tension in the country, the army was swiftly deployed and political steps were taken to ensure that such tension did not flare up in the State.

For example, when anti-Sikh riots swept the country after Indira Gandhi's death, not a single case was registered in West Bengal. Similarly, after the Babri Masjid incident, the firm secular stance of the government prevented communal violence here in West Bengal. Our political ability and the mobilisation of people ideologically and organisationally against communal violence made sure communal forces were unable to raise their swords.

A dangerous situation is now developing in the State, with the ruling party at the Centre taking the Hindutva line and the ruling party in the State giving shelter to Jama'atul Mujahideen fundamentalists from the other side of the border. The government in Bangladesh is in pursuit of them and they find protection here under the ruling party and its administration. With respect to the incidents at Khagragarh, subsequent to the investigation carried out by the intelligence agencies, the political people who sheltered the guilty have not been apprehended; in fact, the administration has gone into denial mode and has destroyed evidence of the blast in Khagragarh. No one in the ruling party has been booked. There is a tacit understanding between the two ruling parties, with the ruling party at the Centre and the ruling party in the State taking opposite sides, thus further polarising the two communities. It is one of the greatest dangers of the present time that, in a State that had not seen political parties taking the side of this or that community for so long, the left and democratic and secular forces are attempting to be made irrelevant, and that the people are being divided along communal lines. Even during the semi-fascist terror of the 1970s or during the days of the Emergency, this sort of communal tension was never seen in West Bengal.

MTR: *How would you characterise the differences between the present situation and the semi-fascist terror in West Bengal in the 1970s?*

SKM: There are many differences between the two periods of political repression. The 1970s were a different time, the situations at the State, national, and international levels were different — and history does not repeat itself. The attack then came at a time when the CPI(M) and associated Left Parties were growing very fast. In terms of electoral performance, we had 40+ Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in 1967, 80+ MLAs in 1969, and 110+ MLAs in 1971. It was a fast growing force that came under sharp attack during the semifascist terror, notwithstanding the rigged 1972 elections. After 1972, we boycotted the State legislature for five years, a period during which we depended solely on extra-parliamentary activities. We won only 14 seats after that election, down from around 114; the election of 1972 was an one that made the term "rigging" enter the political lexicon in a new way. When elections were held in 1977, the Left Front achieved a majority of almost two-thirds; it had great popular support, and remained in power for 34 years, its share of the popular vote always remaining between 40 and 50 per cent. In the 2009 and 2011 elections, we saw a definite decline in the Left vote-share. The elections of 2009 and 2011 were not rigged as were the elections of 1972. These two elections gave the popular mandate to the ruling party; in other words, we were not, in 2009 and 2011, a *growing* party as we had been in the 1970s.

MTR: *Are there other differences? What about the number and method of deaths? Are they similar?*

SKM: The number of casualties now is not comparable to the number in those years since the nature of the attack has changed: more attacks, fewer deaths, more handicapping injuries than fatalities — a change, therefore, in the tactics of attack. The attack is also much more extensive or widespread than in the 1970s. The semifascist terror was concentrated in urban areas in a few districts and in certain select rural areas. The current political repression is mostly in rural areas and covers all districts barring one or two, more repression though in a different form.

The international contexts are also different. The Vietnam war ultimately succeeded, all of South Vietnam and Saigon were taken over by the National Liberation Front, and the socialist camp and the international community had not been overwhelmed by imperialism as they have been now. That was the

time of the Bangladesh liberation movement, and the Indo-Soviet Treaty signed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi brought a certain unity to the fight in Bangladesh.

MTR: *And you mentioned the issue of the State's secular fabric.*

SKM: Yes, in spite of the attacks of the democracy, communal forces did not gain ground. In Bengal, the entire people were united behind the liberation forces in Bangladesh, irrespective of which side of the border they were on. Whether a person was Hindu or Muslim, they shared the opinion that the Razakars were the enemies of the people. The situation has changed. The erstwhile Razakars, now part of the fundamentalist forces, are crossing over and being provided shelter on this side of the border.

MTR: *What are the tasks – the battles — that confront a new political generation today?*

SKM: It is a new experience that the present generation is going through, and an important one. Our generation had the experience of fighting semi-fascist terror and working during the Emergency. The young today must gain experience in fighting in the new global situation and the new correlation of world forces in favour of imperialism, of confronting globalisation and neoliberalism and their impact on national policies, identity politics, and reactionary post-modernist philosophies that are being propagated on a global scale. There is thus a great change in the situation — our generation did not have the experience of confronting these challenges simultaneously. The younger generation faces a multi-pronged challenge, difficult and complicated at every level, globally, nationally and in individual States. I believe they will gain more experience than we did during our lifetimes.

MTR: *And what, in that context, are the prospects for a resurgence of the Left?*

SKM: I shall not go into the global dimensions of this question, although the fundamental objective of establishing a socialist and democratic order in the country is associated with the international situation and what other countries are going through — and there is much need to learn from each other's experiences. I believe that there are objective conditions for a successful resurgence of the Left, whether globally or in the State of West Bengal.

MTR: *What would you say about West Bengal in particular?*

SKM: We first noticed the erosion in our support base after the panchayat elections of 2008 (that is, even before the Lok Sabha elections of 2009). In spite of the changes that have taken place in elections thereafter, we believe that there has been no fundamental change in the correlation of the forces in the State since then. Notwithstanding some erosion, the ruling party continues to have majority support in terms of its popular base. Now they have taken to force, and are rigging the elections to distort the actual correlation of votes in the State out of the fear that if there is a free and fair election, their vote share will decline substantially and the Left Front's share will increase, and although they would probably not lose the majority of votes, their margin of victory would decrease. They are apprehensive particularly in the areas where the Left are strong and able to offer some resistance.

MTR: *What are the positive developments in this regard?*

SKM: The phrase that the bourgeois press loves to repeat — “The Left continues to bleed” — can no longer be made to appear self-evident, because, going by the municipal election results, in terms of popular support, the Left have been able to stop the erosion. Siliguri, but not Siliguri alone, has shown that it is possible to counter the terror and beat the TMC. That is the positive development, and has happened for the first time after four years.

MTR: *What about the threat of the BJP's rise in Bengal?*

SKM: That is the other important development, and manifested in the municipal election results. About a year back, there was a campaign that the BJP was emerging as the real alternative to the TMC in the

State. We said firmly at the time that there is no alternative to the Left, and that statement has been vindicated by the municipal election results. The threat of the BJP emerging as *the* alternative to the TMC has been proved beyond doubt to not be the case, as the BJP has suffered a considerable erosion in support. Be it Congress or BJP, the other parties remain behind the Left in terms of vote share — that is the other important fact to have been established.

But when all said and done, the situation is so complicated and difficult that one should not become complacent as a result of the reduction in the BJP's vote share. One must perceive that communal forces continue to pose a great threat to the unity of people and to secularism, and that that threat should never be underestimated, for communalism cannot be gauged just by vote shares; it has the potential to do severe damage to the state's secular fabric.

MTR: *What do you conclude from these recent developments?*

SKM: Our conclusion is that, in spite of its complications, the present situation is one in which there is potential for the Left to forge ahead and grow further. This is evident from the mood of the people, and the successful resistance to attack in the last municipal elections, the attack itself having been launched by the ruling party in connivance with the local administration (with the State Election Commission pleading its helplessness). It is also evident from the fact that resistance is something that has developed almost spontaneously, with women at the forefront of the struggle.

So objective conditions that have developed that are favourable for the Left to project itself as the real alternative in the battle for democracy and for secularism and against the increasing attack on people's livelihoods. What we consider our most important task is to see that the subjective conditions are focused on organising local and broad-based struggle, uniting the Left and the people, and people and parties associated with the secular and democratic struggle, to build up organisation and not to depend solely on spontaneity. The objective situation occurs independently of individual human will; at the same time, the subjective can be used to take advantage of the situation and overcome the complexities of the objective situation — and that depends on our effort and our will. It is the Left and only the Left only that can provide the alternative in this battle for democracy.