

MANIFESTO OF THE LEFT PARTIES FOR LOK SABHA ELECTIONS-- 1998

For

- * A strong secular-democratic system.**
- * A socially and economically just order for all oppressed sections.**
- * Economic growth with equity.**
- * Corruption free governance and accountability.**

**Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India,
Revolutionary Socialist Party, All India Forward Bloc**

Introduction

The people of India are once again called upon to elect a new Lok Sabha. This mid-term poll has been forced upon the country because of the unreasonable and senseless decision of the Congress to withdraw support to the United Front government. We are currently observing the 50th anniversary of India's independence. At this juncture, the people have to decide how to strengthen the Republic and its secular-democratic basis which can meet the aspirations of all citizens. The Indian Republic is facing a major challenge to its secular-democratic foundations. The very forces which sought to divide and disrupt the struggle for independence have once again reared their heads. The rise of the communal forces represents everything that is backward looking and reactionary in our society. Feudal elements who cannot reconcile to a democratic order, religious revivalists who feel threatened by a modern secular society, the richer classes who want to protect their privileges, are the forces behind the rise of the BJP. They have to be stopped if India is to remain a united and democratic country. The Congress party has degenerated both politically and organisationally. It is a party in decline, as it has pursued when in power, economic policies which militate against the people; it betrayed the secular heritage by compromising with the communal forces and it is a party riddled with corruption. It is this dismal record of the Congress which led to its resounding defeat in the 1996 elections. Its attitude since then shows no redemption. The Congress is no more a party which can govern at the Centre or

provide the country with a new agenda. The United Front came into being at a time when a new alternative was required. An alternative to the discredited Congress and a firm secular response to the communal platform of the BJP. India will be governed by coalitions in the coming days. The question is what type of coalition? The United Front has proved its worth as a united and stable coalition which represents the rich diversity of the people of India.

Left Platform

The Left parties played a crucial role in the formation and consolidation of the United Front. The Left parties while striving to strengthen the United Front and making it victorious wish to present before the people their alternative policies and the way to make India a vibrant democratic and just society. The Left platform represents the aspirations of all sections of the working people, of all patriotic citizens who are committed to the fashioning of a socially and economically just order. The Left is the guardian of the interests of the working people, it fights for economic policies which promote self-reliant growth, employment, equal opportunities and reduction of inequalities.

PART I

SECULARISM AND FEDERALISM: CORNERSTONE OF INDIAN UNITY

Secularism has been defined as a basic feature of the Constitution by the Supreme Court. This constitutional principle expresses the reality of the daily life and experience of the millions of Indians who live and work harmoniously together irrespective of caste, creed and religion. However, secularism has come under continuous assault by the forces represented by the BJP and its mentor, the RSS. There can be no compromise with those who wish to erode the secular basis of the State and the political system.

The Left parties will work for:

- * Legislation for separation of religion and politics.
- * Prohibition on use of religious issues for electoral purposes by political parties.
- * Reference of the Ayodhya dispute to the Supreme Court under Article 138(2) for a speedy judicial verdict.
- * Protection of the basic right of religious belief and practicing one's religion.
- * Implementation of the "Protection of Places of Worship Act" which prohibits change of the character of religious places of worship after 1947.

Strengthen Federalism

The Left parties in contrast to the sectarian communal version of nationhood based on Hindutva, have an alternative vision to strengthen Indian unity. As against a highly centralised and undemocratic system of concentration of all

powers at the Centre, federalism requires a reworking of centre-state relations.

The Left parties will strive for:

- * Adequate powers to the states for decision-making in the economic and political spheres.
- * Strong states will result in a strong Centre. Constitutional amendments for devolving more powers to the states -- economic, fiscal and administrative.
- * Article 356 to be suitably amended so that the draconian power of the Centre to dismiss state governments is curbed and this power is exercised only in extreme contingencies where there is a direct threat to national unity or an onslaught on the secular basis of the State.
- * Further activation of the Inter-State Council and empowering the National Development Council with sufficient powers on planning.

Defend National Unity

It is essential to strengthen Indian unity by removing the feelings of alienation and neglect which has bred separatism in different parts of the country. Imperialism seeks to utilise such forces to advance its aim of weakening the unity of the country. Both in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-Eastern region, challenges to the unity of India exist. The Left parties have been in the forefront in championing the democratic aspirations of the peoples of diverse cultures and language groups in a federal set up as a basis for strengthening Indian unity.

The Left parties will continue to work for:

- * Maximum autonomy for the state of Jammu and Kashmir by maintaining Article 370 of the Constitution; regional autonomy to be provided to Jammu and Ladakh regions within this framework.
- * Negotiations to be conducted with all those groups in the North-East who are advocating separatism while firmly defending the integrity of the Indian Union.
- * Special provision for the development of the North- Eastern region with particular emphasis on infrastructure and development of employment opportunities.

Foreign Policy

The United Front government took some commendable initiatives to improve relations with India's neighbours and to resist pressures to sign the CTBT. In the new world situation where the United States and its western allies seek to dominate the world, it is imperative that Indian foreign policy continues with its basic orientation embodied in the non-aligned policy. This means not succumbing to imperialist pressures which will undermine India's independent positions and harm its security interests.

In the area of foreign policy the Left parties will ensure that:

- * India is projected as an independent power which plays a constructive role in defending the interests of the third world and promoting South-South cooperation.
- * India does not sign any discriminatory treaty on nuclear weapons like the NPT or the CTBT.
- * Further steps are taken to strengthen and improve relations with South-Asian countries and promote SAARC cooperation. Special efforts to improve relations with Pakistan and promote people-to-people ties.
- * Relations with India's biggest neighbour, China, are strengthened and economic ties increased. Relations with Russia to be further strengthened.
- * The Indo-US military cooperation agreement is cancelled.
- * Nuclear weapons are removed from the US military base in Diego Garcia in the Indian ocean.

Part II FOR AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC POLICY

It is a grim reality that fifty years after independence 400 million Indians live in abject poverty. India has the largest number of illiterates in the world with only half the population literate. child malnutrition figures are the highest in the world, excepting Bangladesh.

The policies ushered in, in the name of economic reforms since 1991, have only worsened the situation. Liberalisation has meant a bonanza for the big business houses, landlords, financial speculators and big traders who make super-profits and accumulate huge incomes. Under the IMF-World Bank dictated model, the priorities for India's economic growth are determined not in the interests of the Indian people but for a narrow affluent section at home and foreign capitalists. By these policies 10 percent of the population have enriched themselves at the expense of the remaining 90 percent of the people.

The recent financial turmoil and economic crisis which has hit the countries of South-East and East Asia are a timely warning to those who have pushed for indiscriminate liberalisation in our country. South Korea which was held up as a model for India, reached the brink of financial collapse and was forced to apply to the IMF for a huge loan to bail itself out. India cannot follow this disastrous path.

Economic reforms require a different orientation. The Left parties have consistently advocated an alternative set of policies.

As against the policies of total deregulation of the economy giving full play to the market, rampant privatisation, dismantling of the public sector, indiscriminate entry of foreign capital and import liberalisation; subjecting

Indian agriculture to the vagaries of the international market by promoting so called export-oriented agriculture and withdrawal of the State from development of infrastructure and public economic and social investment, the Left parties advocate an alternative path of self-reliant economic development.

Land Reforms: Key to Progress

The main cause for poverty is the unequal and exploitative land relations; parasitic landlordism with its attendant social and economic oppression is the major obstacle to ensuring a better life for the majority of the Indian people.

Fifty years after independence only 52 lakh acres of surplus land have been taken over and distributed out of a total of 75 lakh acres declared surplus which itself is a gross underestimate. On the contrary, under liberalisation, land ceiling laws are being diluted to favour big business and foreign companies; waste land and degraded forest lands are sought to be allotted to these big companies and not to the landless. It is only the Left-led governments of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura which took up land reforms seriously and implemented them. West Bengal alone has distributed 20 percent of the total surplus land distributed in the country. The Left will ensure that there is no dilution of land reform legislation.

The Left parties will work for:

- * speedy and comprehensive measures for implementing radical land reforms
- * takeover and distribution of surplus land above the ceiling; cultivable waste land to be given to the landless.
- * correction of land records
- * security for tenants
- * issuing joint pattas for women

Agriculture

- * Increased public investment in agriculture.
- * Greater allocation for developing irrigation facilities.
- * Ensure self-sufficiency in foodgrains production for food security.
- * comprehensive insurance schemes for crop and cattle.
- * expansion of credit facility for the poor peasant and small farmers
- * proper assistance to producers of traditional crops and protection of markets and sources of raw material.

Agricultural Workers

Agricultural workers constitute the most oppressed section both economically and socially.

For them:

- * Minimum wages have to be guaranteed
- * Pension and other social welfare benefits provided.
- * Equal wages for equal work for women agricultural labourers.
- * Provision of homestead land.
- * The Left parties will step up the struggle for adoption of a Central Legislation for agricultural workers, a commitment made in the United Front CMP which has not yet been implemented.

Rights of the Working Class

Industrial workers have been the worst affected by the onslaught of liberalisation and privatisation. The closure of thousands of private sector units, the dismantling of the public sector enterprises and the failure to revive sick industries like textiles have led to the loss of jobs of tens of thousands workers. In the name of reforms, big capitalists have been given the freedom to shut down factories, re-allocate units and retrench workers in a big way.

The Left parties will fight for:

- * Revival of sick units; ending of disinvestment in profitable public sector units, revival of some of the sick public sector units by a package of measures including joint sector ventures, the revival package for the NTC mills, fertiliser units, IDPL etc should be part of an overall thrust to rejuvenate the public sector and revive industries which are essential for self reliance.
- * Provision of need-based minimum wage for workers; protective legislation for unorganised workers, protection of employment and emoluments with inflation-linked increase in wages
- * Recognition of trade unions through secret ballot and protection of trade union rights.
- * Schemes for workers participation in management and observance of the principle of collective bargaining protected.
- * Grant of pension to working people as a third benefit; one-rank one-pension for ex-servicemen; upgrading pensions of all categories of pensioners in consonance with the cost of living.

Industries and Infrastructure

Increased public investment in infrastructure is essential. The present policy of cutting down public investment should be reversed. The private sector cannot replace the role of public investment in this sphere. Review the power and telecom policies, adequate public outlay should be provided for expansion of power generation, communications, roads etc. Incentives for foreign capital in

all spheres and across the board import liberalisation have adversely affected domestic industries.

The Left parties want:

- * Strengthening of the public sector in the core and strategic areas with sufficient injection of capital and technology. The public sector be streamlined and fresh investment be channeled into key sectors. The public sector will have to play the crucial role in meeting some of the basic needs of the people like mass transport, health services, education etc.
- * Foreign capital be solicited to in those areas for which clear-cut priorities are set. These priorities are to be determined by the need for developing new production capacities and acquiring new technology.
- * Protection of domestic industry from indiscriminate lowering of import duties and takeover of existing Indian companies by foreign companies. Private sector will be encouraged to invest in new productive areas, R&D and service sector like tourism.
- * Encouragement to small scale industries with adequate incentives and sufficient credit from banks.
- * Protection of traditional industries such as handloom, coir etc. Yarn to be provided for at control rates for the weavers and adequate facilities for the marketing of their goods.
- * End to deployment of deep-sea fishing trawlers, protect rights of the fishing community.

The WTO treaties are loaded in favour of the richer countries of the North against the interests of the developing countries. India should take the lead to forge common cause with the countries of the South to negotiate terms which safeguard our interests with regard to TRIPS, TRIMS and financial services.

Financial Sector

The efforts to stampede India into opening up the financial sector to suit the interests of international finance capital must be resisted.

- * The insurance sector should not be privatised; LIC and GIC should be streamlined to make them more efficient. Foreign companies should be barred entry into this sector.
- * The trend of privatising the banking sector should be halted. Reforms to make banks accountable and restore social priorities.
- * Proper regulation of non-banking finance companies to safeguard interests of depositors.
- * Regulate capital flows; no convertibility on the capital account. Adequate

resource mobilisation: *Broaden the direct taxes base; instead of reducing taxes on the rich, raise the tax rates on the affluent sections (corporate tax, wealth tax, income tax etc) and ensure strict compliance; tax evasion should be firmly dealt with.

* Unearth black-money kept inside and outside the country and tap it for productive purposes.

* Wasteful expenditure and the growing misuse of public money by officialdom and public servants should be stopped.

Public Distribution System

The Left parties attach the highest importance to the strengthening and expansion of the public distribution system. This is the most effective way to protect the common people from the adverse impact of the price rise of all essential commodities. For this:

* 14 essential commodities should be included for supply in the PDS

* A network of fair-price shops and cooperatives should cover all panchayats.

* for those below the poverty line there should be provision of supply of foodgrains at 50 percent below the central issue price.

* Overhead costs should be curtailed, wastage and leakage from the FCI and distribution mechanism should be eliminated.

Part III FOR BETTERMENT OF CITIZENS' LIVES

The overall progress of the country can be ensured only when the people experience all round improvement in their material and cultural lives. The neglect of the social sector must be abandoned and State expenditure stepped up substantially.

Education

The per capita expenditure on education in India is one of the lowest in the world. This is a shameful record. It is in the states with Left-led governments like Kerala and West Bengal that adequate provision is made for education in the budget. To see that every child goes to school and illiteracy is abolished must be the priority goal.

The Left parties pledge to:

* Introduce compulsory primary education accompanied by free mid-day meals, provision of text books and other education materials.

* Free and universal education must be guaranteed for all children upto the age of 14 years. The 83rd Constitutional amendment making education a basic right should be adopted for children upto the age of 14.

- * Rapid expansion of primary school network.
- * Upgrade the salaries of elementary school teachers and provide schools equipped with minimum facilities.
- * Syllabus and curriculum to inculcate secularism, progressive values, scientific temper and national unity.
- * Allocation of 10 percent of Union Budget and 30 percent of states' budget for education.
- * Support to mass literacy programmes.
- * Democratisation of the higher education system and development of vocational education.

Health

Liberalisation has led to neglect of the public health system and cutbacks in expenditure on public health. Epidemics and mass outbreak of water-borne diseases are taking a heavy toll of lives.

In this connection, the Left parties advocate:

- * Immediately increasing the expenditure on public health to 5 percent of the GDP (at present it is a miserable 1.12 percent).
- * Provision of adequate network of primary health centres with sufficient stocks of medicines as laid down by the Ministry of Health itself.
- * Ensuring supply of essential drugs at prices affordable to the common people.
- * Increasing the outlay on preventive medicine and eradication of diseases like malaria, Tuberculosis etc.

Water Resources

- * There should be a National Water Policy. Provide for community/panchayat role in management of water resources. Exercise control on indiscriminate use of ground water.
- * Drinking water is a problem in 2 lakh villages. Provision of potable drinking water to all villages must be a priority task.

Housing

- * Housing to be accorded the status of a basic right; housing schemes for urban and rural poor to be stepped up.

Employment

- * Guarantee right to work as a fundamental right.
- * Provide food-for-work programme to generate employment.

* Ensure adequate credit for self-employment schemes for educated unemployed, artisans and handicapped persons.

* Scrap freeze in recruitment and cuts in existing employment in the Government sector.

Women

Women are struggling to acquire equal status in all spheres -- social, economic and political. The Left parties have been the firmest champions of women's rights and for ending gender discrimination.

* Implementation of equal rights and other legal and constitutional guarantees.

* The Left parties have consistently fought for the adoption of the constitutional amendment providing for one-third reservation for women in legislatures, in the last parliament. The Left parties are committed to see this is implemented in the new parliament expeditiously.

* Special schemes for female-headed households in rural areas and increasing employment opportunities for women.

* Strict measures against atrocities on women and legislation to check sexual abuse of children. * Equal legal rights for women of all communities should be provided.

* Equal rights in property and joint matrimonial property rights; compulsory registration of marriages.

* Abolition of child labour

* Universal provision of child care services.

Population Policy

Conduct widespread campaign for a family size norm of two children per couple without any gender bias. Withdraw the proposed 79th Constitutional Amendment Bill for disqualification of all those who have more than two children as it will militate against women's interests.

For Social Justice

The struggle to end social exploitation and caste discrimination requires a sustained struggle to fight all forms of caste oppression and inhuman practices like untouchability. The State should undertake not only to implement laws in this respect but also discharge its responsibilities to propagate against casteism.

The Left parties call for:

Dalits and Adivasis

* Stringent action against atrocities against scheduled castes and scheduled

tribes and invoking of the provisions of the Prevention of Atrocities Act for this purpose.

- * Ensuring that quotas for reservation for scheduled castes and tribes are filled up
- * OBC reservation to be implemented.
- * Reservation to be extended to dalit Christians.
- * Protect land rights of adivasis and restore land alienated from them illegally.
- * Ensure the right of access to forests and forest produce; the Forest Act be amended for this purpose.
- * Regional autonomy should be provided for tribal compact areas wherever necessary
- * Foster the development of the languages and culture of adivasis. Rights of Minorities
- * Protection of the just rights of the minorities; implement provisions of the Constitution to prevent discrimination; Special schemes for promoting educational facilities for deprived minorities Protection and encouragement of Urdu language

Youth

- * A national youth policy must be adopted which comprehensively deals with issues of special concern to youth.
- * The State should provide for an adequate network of sports and cultural facilities for youth in all parts of the country.

Media and Culture

The State should provide facilities for development of secular and democratic culture. The diverse cultural traditions of the people must find free expression and equal treatment by the State.

- * All national languages listed in the Eighth schedule of the Constitution should be equally encouraged and developed.
- * The Prasar Bharati Corporation must be strengthened so that it becomes a genuine public broadcasting service. There has to be legislation to prevent growth of monopolies in the print and electronic media which is inherently undemocratic. No foreign ownership of print media. Revamp the proposed Broadcasting Bill in this light.
- * Enforce a media code for satellite broadcasters.
- * Ensure that states have a say in media policy and programmes in the public broadcasting service.

Science and Technology

In promoting self-reliance, it is essential that a science and technology policy be adopted which provides for development of scientific institutions and development of substantial R&D potential in India. A patents policy which promotes indigenous research and scientific development must be adhered to. Any review of the Indian Patent Act of 1970 should safeguard the interests of Indian industry, research priorities, self-reliance, food-security, public health and national security.

Environment

* Formulate an environment policy which is integrated with the needs of rapid and sustainable development. * Strict control must be exercised against industries using hazardous technology which affects the health of workers and the neighbourhood. * Stringent action should be taken against contractors illegally cutting down forests. * There has to be a uniform national rehabilitation policy for persons displaced by development projects. * Develop mass-transit and public transport system to curb vehicular pollution.

Part IV STRENGTHEN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

The Left parties will work for strengthening the parliamentary democratic system. They will oppose any move to truncate parliamentary democracy or alter it by introducing the Presidential form of government. Any move to undermine parliamentary democracy will usher in authoritarianism to which the Left is totally opposed. The first step to strengthen parliamentary democracy in the country is to ensure electoral reforms.

Electoral Reforms

These must include:

- * Amendment of Section 77 of the Representation of People's Act to plug loopholes in enforcing ceiling on election expenditure by bringing all election expenses including those by parties and friends in the candidates expenditure.
- * Proportional representation with partial list system.
- * Effective steps to prohibit persons with criminal background from contesting elections.
- * State funding in the form of material for recognised political parties.
- * Amendment of the Anti-Defection law so that any elected representative who leaves the party he or she represents has to vacate the seat forthwith.

Curb Corruption

* Steps to curb corruption at all levels particularly those holding high public office. Lok Pal Act should be adopted which will provide for investigation and

binding recommendation on prosecution of public servants upto the level of prime minister. Provide for CBI and other investigating agencies getting functional autonomy to investigate cases leading upto prosecution. *

The system of governance should be made more accountable for which citizens must have the right to information for which a Right to Information Act must be passed.

Judicial Reforms

* Constituting a National Judicial Commission for appointment of judges of High Courts and Supreme Court. Reforms in judicial system to provide speedy relief at affordable cost to the common people and to heighten accountability.

* There should be a proper balance in the relations between the legislature, judiciary and the executive and the exercise of powers in their respective spheres without encroaching into the legitimate domain of the other organs.

* Devolution of powers from the Centre to the states with suitable constitutional amendments. Decentralisation of powers to the district bodies and panchayats; ensuring local participation in formulation of plans and projects.

Left governments

The Left-led governments of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura have established the credentials of the Left. Implementation of Land reforms, protection of the rights of the working people, decentralisation of power to the panchayats, preservation of communal harmony and taking democracy to the grassroots have been some of the achievements of these governments. The Left wants these pro-people, democratic policies to be on the agenda of the Centre.

Voting for the Left parties the CPI(M), CPI, Forward Bloc and RSP will be a mandate for:

- * Guaranteeing the secular-democratic basis of the Indian Republic and national unity
- * Pro-people economic policies
- * Advancing the struggle for a corruption-free government and system
- * Ensuring a stable UF government which will work for growth with equity.

Increase the Left Representation in Parliament! Defeat the BJP and the Congress!

Elect The United Front To Government!