

Leaflet

On the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Left Front Government of West Bengal

A Historic Anniversary

June 21, 2002 marks a historic anniversary. On this date, the Left Front government of West Bengal completes 25 years in office. The continuous rule by the Left Front in West Bengal and its outstanding record in terms of service to the people, protection of democratic rights, preservation of communal harmony and the struggle to implement alternative policies within the limitations of the existing set-up -- are an inspiring record.

For any political party or coalition being in a state government continuously for 25 years would be a unique record. For a Communist Party and the Left parties to remain in office for so long in West Bengal winning a two-thirds majority in six successive elections is all the more remarkable. Running a state government by the Left parties under a system where real power rests with the Centre and where the Congress, the BJP and other bourgeois-landlord parties have been in power, is no ordinary achievement. It was possible because the CPI(M) and the Left movement has a strong mass base and has struck deep roots among the people.

No other state government in India has tackled the land question so consistently, which is the foremost question for the bulk of the population which lives in the rural areas. No other government in India has done as much for the rural poor as the Left Front government of West Bengal.

The fact that 20 per cent of the total surplus land distributed in India is in West Bengal is a testimony to the way the state government has sincerely implemented land reform laws. Under 'Operation Barga', 14 lakh (1.4 million) sharecroppers were registered for security of tenure.

The West Bengal set out the model for a democratic panchayati raj system much before the advent of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments which institutionalised the panchayati raj system. West Bengal from 1978 held five rounds of elections to the three-tier panchayat system and decentralised powers. The implementation of land reforms laid out the basis for the participation of the rural poor and the smaller peasants in the panchayat institutions.

Land reforms and the panchayati raj system has shaped the course of the rural development in West Bengal. The rural development policy of the Left Front government has been guided by philosophy of redistribution of assets before growth, to ensure growth with social justice.

The results of this policy are there for all to see. The rate of growth of agricultural production has registered a tremendous increase. In rice production, West Bengal stands first today. The living standards of the rural people had steadily gone up as a result.

The Left Front government has also shown the way for the country on the vital question of observing the secular principle of the State and maintaining communal harmony.

It is a remarkable achievement that a state, which saw communal violence and partition when a part of Bengal became East Pakistan, is today a bastion of communal peace under the Left Front government. West Bengal has a Muslim population of 25 per cent, one of the highest in the country. Yet, in the past 25 years, there were no major incidents of communal riots. This was strikingly illustrated in 1984, when anti-Sikh riots engulfed many of the cities of North India. Calcutta and West Bengal saw no such incidents.

Subsequently, when large-scale communal violence erupted all over the country during the infamous 'ratha yatra' of the BJP and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, all attempts of communal mischief in West Bengal were put down with a firm hand.

Today, when the country is being ruled by the BJP-led combine from Delhi and the horrific events which took place in Gujarat are vivid in the minds of the people, the example of West Bengal where communal peace and harmony prevails is a source of inspiration to all democratic and secular-minded people.

The issue of social justice is given top priority by the Left Front government as part of its commitment to better the lot of the most oppressed sections. As far as women's rights are concerned, substantial advance has been made under the Left Front government. So far, 5.5 lakh women have been given joint or individual pattas. 55 per cent of the beneficiaries of the surplus land distributed has been scheduled caste and scheduled tribe families. It is well known that West Bengal is free from atrocities on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Incidents of which are regularly reported from many other states and recorded in the government reports.

The formation of the Left Front government in 1997 marked the end of a prolonged period of semi-fascist terror and authoritarian rule in West Bengal instituted by the Congress. Under the Left Front government, there has been restoration of democratic rights and an atmosphere where democratic political activities can take place unhindered.

The working class has been able to conduct its trade union activities and organised movements for its rights and demands. From the outset, it has been the policy of the Left Front government not to use the State machinery against the workers.

The Left Front government has, in the recent period, paid priority and special attention to the industrialisation of the state. In doing so, special attention is being paid to generate employment opportunities.

This task is being undertaken in a situation where, for the last one decade, the overall policies of the Centre has been for liberalisation and privatisation. The Left Front government is fashioning policies to meet the new situation. As in the past, it will show that it is possible to implement pro-people policies, despite the policies of the Centre.

The existence of the Left Front government is a pillar for the Left and democratic movement in the country. At every crucial juncture in national politics, the Left Front government's role has been to project the Left and democratic viewpoint in a situation where major bourgeois parties are acting as agents of the big business, landlords and imperialist capital.

In the words of Jyoti Basu, who was the Chief Minister of West Bengal for 23 years: "We had a reasonable clear agenda before us when we started even though we had no model to guide us. We have been pursuing an arduous path in our efforts to consolidate the Left, democratic and secular forces. Our present experiments and experiences will help us in our long-drawn struggle to achieve the goal of people's democracy and socialism".

When we celebrate the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Left Front government, we salute the people of West Bengal and their political consciousness.

All those who cherish the values of secularism democracy and look forward to socialism will greet the Left Front government and wish it all success in its future endeavours.

This booklet should help the reader understand the significant achievements of the Left Front government.

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25 Years of Left Front in West Bengal

I

Rural Development

The struggles on the agrarian front have been crucial in the advancement of left movement in West Bengal. Implementation of land reforms was the priority of the governments formed under the leadership of the left in 1967 and 1969. Naturally, land reforms and rural development were on the top of the agenda when the Left Front came to power in 1977. The two most important changes brought about by the Left Front government in the countryside when it came to power were the implementation of land reforms and reorganisation of panchayats as democratic institutions of local government. These two – identified as the policy of walking on two legs – were closely inter-related and the success in one depended crucially on the success in the other. The most important lesson learnt from the obstacles put by the central government, bureaucracy and judiciary in the attempts to implement the land reforms by the 1967 and 1969 United Front governments was that the implementation of land reforms required democratisation of local government and involvement of masses in the implementation of land reforms.

Implementation of Land Reforms

Implementation of land reforms has been one of the most important achievements of the Left Front Government in West Bengal. It is because of the political will of the Left Front government that West Bengal, along with Kerala and Tripura, can boast of implementing land reforms most successfully in the country. The Land Reforms in West Bengal had two important components: tenancy reforms and redistribution of land. The Left Front government, with the support of Kisan Sabha and panchayats, organised a massive campaign popularly known as Operation Barga for registration of names of tenants in the land records. A constitutional amendment enacted by the Left Front government provided a permanent and heritable right to all registered tenants to cultivate the leased in land. The second component of land reform comprised acquisition of ceiling surplus land and its redistribution among the poor and the landless.

Following are some of the main features of land reforms implemented by the Left Front in West Bengal.

- Operation Barga involved registration of 1.4 million bargadars. Through Operation Barga, about 1.1 million acres of land was permanently brought under the control of *bargadars* and their right to cultivate the land was secured.

- In all, the government acquired about 1.37 million acres of land under the land reform legislation.
- About 1.04 million acres of the land vested by the State through the land reform legislation was redistributed among 2.5 million landless and marginal cultivator households.
- Homestead lands have been given to about 5 lakh households belonging to agricultural labour, fishing and artisan households.
- West Bengal accounts for only 3.5 per cent of agricultural land in the country. It is noteworthy that the land vested under land reform legislation in West Bengal constitutes about 18 per cent of all land vested in the country under land reform legislation. The land redistributed in West Bengal under land reform constitutes about 20 per cent of the total land redistributed in India.
- Dalits and adivasis were the major beneficiaries of land reforms. About 55 per cent of beneficiaries of land redistribution and 42 per cent of recorded *bargadars* came from these sections.
- Land reform in West Bengal was also an instrument of women's empowerment. Over 5.5 lakh women have been given joint and individual pattas (land title deeds) under the programme.
- While the decade of 1990s saw undoing of whatever land reform measures were undertaken in several States, West Bengal acquired an additional 95,000 acres of land under the land reform legislation and redistributed an additional 94,000 acres. These figures account for almost all the land acquired in the country in the 1990s and over 40 per cent of the land redistributed in the country in this period.

II

Reorganisation of Panchayats

Soon after coming to power, the Left Front government reorganised the institutions of local government into a three-tier system of democratically elected bodies. This comprised grama panchayats at the anchal level, panchayat samities at the block level and zilla parishads at the district level. Seventeen years later this became a model for all States to adopt when 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments were enacted. Following are some of the important features of the Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal.

- Since 1978, elections to the panchayati raj institutions have been regularly held every five years. West Bengal holds the record of having the longest functioning democratic institutions of local government.
- The local bodies in West Bengal also have the distinction of having a large representation of income-poor and socially deprived sections. Dalits and adivasis have the largest and increasing representation among all caste and social groups. Estimates of representation of landless, and marginal and small cultivators in the local bodies range

from 75 to 90 per cent. Since 1995, one third of the seats and positions of chairpersons have been reserved for women.

- In the late 1990s, the Panchayat Raj system in West Bengal was further strengthened by introducing *grama sansads*, the general council of voters in every ward, that is required to meet twice a year with a minimum quorum of 10 per cent of voters to discuss the work done by the panchayats and utilisation of funds.
- The panchayats in West Bengal have been given a substantial share of resources and a range of responsibilities. The total divisible outlay meant for the districts reached 50 per cent of the State plan outlays in the 1990s.
- The role of panchayats in West Bengal in effectively implementing the poverty alleviation programmes has been recognised by official bodies like the Planning Commission.

The role of panchayats in changing the rural landscape in West Bengal after the Left Front government came to power cannot be exaggerated. Left Front consciously adopted the policy of using the panchayats as a platform for fighting rural vested interests and changing the correlation of class forces in favour of the working people. Panchayats played an important role in the implementation of land reforms. The local bodies in West Bengal perform civic duties and undertake developmental activities like construction and maintenance of hospitals, schools and libraries, promotion of agriculture, cooperatives and cottage industries, child welfare activities, etc. They play an important role in the local-level planning and implementation of government schemes. Panchayats in West Bengal have played an important role in activities like mobilising cooperation for improving agricultural production, management of local resources, and identification of beneficiaries for housing, poverty alleviation and social security programmes. This has made the panchayats a critical institution of local governance in the West Bengal countryside. The fact that these institutions are democratic and have a large representation of the working people is an achievement that makes everyone proud.

III

Rural Economic Development

Rural West Bengal was known for agricultural stagnation until the 1970s. Reports of several official committees as well as the Seventh Plan document noted the underutilisation of productive potential in rural West Bengal. Left Front's coming to power in the State was like a new dawn for rural West Bengal. The post-1977 period has seen a remarkable growth of rural economy. The change in the correlation of class forces in the favour of working people through implementation of land reforms and reorganisation of panchayats helped the State not only in overcoming the agrarian impasse but in achieving growth rates of agricultural production

as were unmatched by any other State in the country. Some of the important achievements of development of agriculture and allied sectors during the period of Left Front government are as follows:

- In the post-1977 period, the foodgrain production in West Bengal grew at the rate of 6 per cent per annum, which was highest among seventeen most populous States of India.
- West Bengal has emerged as the largest producer of rice and second largest producer of potato in the country.
- Cropping intensity in West Bengal has increased from about 136 per cent in 1980-81 to about 180 per cent in 2000-01, second highest in the country.
- Scholarly studies have reported that high agricultural growth was characteristic of most crops and was widespread across districts.
- Economic conditions of agricultural workers have improved considerably as a result of land reforms and rise in wages. In the 1980s, the growth of agricultural wages in West Bengal was highest among all States of India. Agricultural growth in the post-1977 period also led to expansion of employment in agriculture.
- West Bengal has also improved production in other sectors of rural economy. It has the largest production of fish and fish seedlings among all India States.

The development of agriculture and allied sectors has brought significant changes in the material conditions of life of people of West Bengal.

- West Bengal had the highest growth of per capita net state domestic product among all States in the country in the 1990s.
- The decline in rural poverty between 1977-78 and 1997 was highest in West Bengal among all States of India. In this period, the proportion of people below poverty line declined in rural West Bengal by 36 percentage points.
- Data show that the per capita calorie intake in rural West Bengal increased by 184 kilocalories between 1987-88 and 1993-94. In the same period, the per capita calorie intake in rural India as a whole declined by 38 kilocalories.
- West Bengal was the only State in the country where monthly per capita cereal consumption increased between 1972-73 and 1993-94. In all other States the consumption of cereals fell in absolute terms.

IV

Education and Health

Initiatives of the Left Front for the expansion of literacy and school education have had to face severe obstacles. Despite these, the Government of West Bengal has undertaken several important initiatives

for the expansion of literacy and primary education. The budgetary allocation for education has gone up from 12 per cent in 1976-77 to about 25 per cent in 2000-01. The number of primary schools increased from about 57 lakhs in 1978 to 1.23 crores in 1999. The government has also set up a large number of Child Education Centres. The average distance between schools and living settlements has gone down and that in opening new schools, the Left Front government has concentrated on areas having large population of dalits and adivasis. The number of teachers increased raising the average number of teachers per primary school to three in 1992. Left Front has also made every effort to improve the working conditions of teachers. The government made all school education free and started special schemes for providing textbooks to school children and uniforms to girl students. West Bengal, for example, introduced a system of no-detention or automatic promotion for the first five years of school. As a result of these, the school enrolments have gone up substantially. The Education Commission reported that the school enrolments increased by about 80 per cent between 1977 and 1992. The NSSO data show that in 1993-94 about 65 per cent of all children of age 5-14 attended school in rural West Bengal; the corresponding figure for India as a whole was 63 per cent. Rural West Bengal was particularly ahead in terms of attendance rates among girls: in West Bengal over 61 per cent girls attended school while the corresponding figure for India as a whole was only 55 per cent.

While these achievements are noteworthy, the Left Front is acutely aware that there is much still to be desired in the area of expansion of education and has taken important steps in the recent years to attain the objectives of universal literacy and primary school education.

The government has given priority to improving the public health system of West Bengal in the recent years. Certain achievements in this sphere are of note:

1. West Bengal had the second lowest crude death rate in 1999 (7.1, the lowest being 6.4 for Kerala) among all States in India.
2. In 1999, West Bengal has the third lowest birth rate among all States of India.
3. Life expectancy at birth is about 72 years in West Bengal, which is next only to Kerala and Maharashtra.
4. Among all States, the public health system in West Bengal covers the largest proportion of the population (about 70 per cent).

It is clear that the achievements of Left Front government in the area of public health are substantial. The government seeks to build further on these achievements in the coming future.

V

Initiatives for the Socially Weaker Sections

Dalits and Adivasis

Dalits and adivasis have been the major beneficiaries of implementation of land reforms and reorganisation of local government. As mentioned before, about 42 per cent of the recorded *bargadars* and 55 per cent of the beneficiaries of land redistribution were dalits and adivasis. Of all social and caste groups, dalits and adivasis have had the largest representation in the panchayati raj institutions and their representation has been increasing over the years. These two major initiatives of the Left Front government have gone a long way in empowering dalits and adivasis in West Bengal.

There are also a large number of schemes designed specifically to support dalits and adivasis. At present about 32,000 dalit students and 28,000 adivasi students are provided with expenses for living in hostels at the pre-secondary level. The government has also constructed about 240 hostels for primary and secondary students from dalit and adivasi communities and at present 7,200 students are living in these hostels. Day scholarships are provided to 1.1 lakh dalit students and 80,000 adivasi students.

Government has established a SC ST Development and Finance Corporation to support poor dalit and adivasi families by providing finance for household-based self-employment schemes. West Bengal Tribals Development Coperatives Corporation has helped form about 120 multipurpose and 2 women cooperatives. These cooperatives generated employment of the order of 80,000 labour days in 1999-2000 through organising collection of *kendu* leaves and *shaal* seeds.

Minorities

Providing social security and economic support to the minorities has been an important concern of the Left Front government. LFG has established a West Bengal Minorities Development Finance Corporation that provides loans for self-employment programmes and training to persons from minority communities to help them economically. West Bengal also provides scholarships to meritorious students from the minority communities.

Women

Women's empowerment has been an important goal for the Left Front. The most important work done by the Left Front government towards this end has been to give joint and individual pattas (land title

deeds) to 5.5 lakh women. The State has also, in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments, reserved 33 per cent of the seats and posts of chairpersons in the panchayati raj institutions for women. It is, however, noteworthy that the actual representation of women exceeds one third as a number of women candidates also win in the general constituencies. At present, about 36 per cent of the gram panchayat members are women. Also, 7 out of 17 zilla parishads have a woman sabhadhipati and 155 out of 351 panchayat samities have a woman sabhapati.

Several other initiatives have been undertaken by the State for economic and social security and upliftment of women. About 50,000 women are covered under stipends for widows and aged women. About 1 lakh women have been supported through projects of the Society Welfare Board. There are a large number of cooperatives run by women: these include 210 dairy cooperatives, 66 industrial cooperatives, 29 credit societies and a large number of canteens and weaving cooperatives. In the recent years, there has been a large mobilisation of self-help groups, mainly of women, in some of the districts. Medinipur alone has about 21,000 such self-help groups.

VI

Safeguarding Democracy and Democratic Rights

The Left Front Government has made sustained and serious attempts to strengthen democratic institutions and guaranteed the democratic rights and civil liberties of the people of the state. This has been done with the understanding that deepening of democracy represents the essential precondition for advancing the interests of the toiling masses and ensuring that the fruits of development actually accrue to them.

The state had experienced 6 long years of semi-fascist terror unleashed by the Congress Central and State governments between 1971 and 1977 which was directed at liquidating the base of the C.P.I.(M) in particular and the Left in general. All democratic rights were trampled upon and any opposition to this murder of democracy was met with severe repression.

The restoration of democratic rights was bound to a key agenda of the newly elected Left Front Government. Having been the victim of draconian laws, the Left Front Government has consistently refused to implement such laws like the NSA, TADA and POTA. Full trade union rights were restored and all sections of the people, including police personnel, regained their legitimate right to association and collective bargaining. Even more pertinent is the approach of the Government towards the struggles of the toilers. Common experience shows that in states ruled by parties of the bourgeois-landlord ruling classes, struggles of the working class, peasantry and other sections are often met with repression by the police. The Left Front Government has forbidden the

police from interfering in legitimate struggles of different sections of the people. The Government has not satisfied itself with this alone and does not play the role of a bystander in the battles between the exploited and the exploiters. It brings its weight to bear in favour of the workers in negotiations and tripartite talks. Besides the strength of the trade union general democratic movement in the state, this role of the Left Front Government has also made a big contribution to significant gains made by workers and other toilers in the state over the past 25 years.

The Left Front Government has also strengthened democracy in the state by upholding the sanctity of different democratic institutions. West Bengal is one of the few states where elections to panchayats and other civic bodies have been held regularly every 5 years. West Bengal under the Left Front was the first state to reduce the voting age in elections to civic bodies from 21 years to 18 years. The thorough going land reforms carried out in the aegis of the Left Front Government have led to economic empowerment of the rural poor. This accompanied by devolution of greater powers to panchayats and the powerful mass movement led by the Left have provided the real basis for the deepening of democracy and exercise of democratic rights in West Bengal.

This burgeoning of democracy at the grassroots has not come without a price. Ruling class political parties like the Trinamul-BJP combine and the Congress as well as landlords and other rural rich have waged a relentless battle to roll back the gains made by the rural poor and done their level best to subvert the democratic process. Thousands of cadres of the Left Front parties have sacrificed their lives to foil these designs in the last twenty five years. Over 300 cadres of the Left were killed in 3 districts of the state between 1999 and 2001 while fighting the terror unleashed by goons of the Trinamul Congress.

The Left Front Government has also consistently championed another crucial aspect of Indian democracy. This concerns the devolution of greater financial, legislative and administrative powers to the states. The long stretch of Congress rule at the Centre saw the steady erosion of the powers of the states. This situation has deteriorated further with the coming into power at the Centre of a combination led by the BJP, a party which upholds a unitary form of government. The Left Front Government has repeatedly raised the issue of democratic restructuring of Centre-State relations in the past 25 years. In doing so it has not restricted itself to raising specific demands relating to the state alone but also tried to mobilise other state governments and parties around demands relating to strengthening of federal polity in general as well.

It is this record of the Left Front Government which has led to West Bengal being justly called the advanced outpost and bastion of democracy in India today.

VII

In Defence of Communal Harmony and Rights of the Minorities

The extent to which communal harmony has been ensured in West Bengal during the 25 year rule of the Left Front can be fully understood only in the context of the escalation in communal tensions in India in the same period. This period, especially from the mid 1980s, has seen the rapid rise of communal forces, represented by the RSS-BJP and other outfits of the Hindu Right. This process has been accompanied by growing communal polarization and heightened attacks on the minorities in large parts of the country leading to the loss of thousands of innocent lives. The recent State sponsored carnage of minorities in Gujarat epitomises the grave dangers inherent in the growth of communal forces. In contrast to this, West Bengal has presented a picture of communal amity and peace throughout this period. It is only the principled politics of the Left, backed by a strong secular movement among the people which has kept West Bengal away from the horrifying violence that has accompanied the growth of communalism. Maintenance of communal harmony and defence of the rights of the minorities would not have been possible without the Left Front being in power in Bengal during this trying period.

It is not as if communal forces and elements are absent in West Bengal. The opportunist role of the Congress vis-a-vis communal forces and the alliance of the Trinamul Congress with the BJP have provided scope for communal forces to extend their sphere of activities into West Bengal. Attempts by such forces to create communal tensions and riots have not been lacking and continue till date. In the aftermath of the assassination of Smt. Indira Gandhi concerted attempts were made to unleash anti-Sikh riots. The late 1980s and early 1990s which saw the extensive hate campaign by the RSS-BJP and their associates, leading to widespread riots were other such occasions. In all these cases the designs of the communal forces were effectively thwarted by the firm intervention of the Left Front Government accompanied large scale mobilisation of cadres of the Left parties in defence of communal harmony and the minorities at the ground level. The continuous ideological campaign among the people for defence of secularism by both the state government and Left parties created the atmosphere in which attempts to disrupt communal harmony could be quickly and decisively defeated.

It is correctly said that protection of the interests of the minorities is the litmus test of democracy which is de facto majority rule. The Left Front has taken several steps to ensure that the minorities get their due share in development. The advance of secular and democratic practice under Left Front dispensation has provided equal opportunities for minorities, especially Muslims who constitute 24% of the state's population. These opportunities have enabled them to launch struggles for better living

standards, educational and other facilities and a life of dignity in general. Muslim peasants have received their due and proportionate share in the over one million acres of land distributed, without any discrimination. Similarly large number of Muslim peasants are among those one and a half million sharecroppers who have been registered under Operation Barga, thereby assuring them of their agricultural rights and freedom from rapacious exploitation by the landlords.

The Left Front Government has set up a specific department of Minorities Development and Welfare. Working under its aegis, the West Bengal Development and Finance Corporation has started several projects for giving loans on easy terms for self-employment to minorities. Rs. 1781 lakhs were disbursed under such schemes in 2001-2002. This allocation for disbursement for the year 2002-2003 has been increased almost three times to Rs.5083 lakhs. The Government has provided financial assistance towards hostel accommodation for girls students from educationally backward sections of the minorities, besides providing similar assistance to technical/professional institutions run by organisations of educationally backward minorities and pre-examination coaching to these sections. It also sanctions stipends to minorities for training in different crafts and vocations.

The Left Front Government has made a conscious effort to promote the rights of linguistic minorities in the state. Urdu speaking Muslims constitute both a religious and linguistic minority. Keeping the cultural identity and needs of this section in mind the Left Front Government established the Urdu Academy at the same time as the establishment of the Bangla Academy. The Urdu Academy brings out a large number of publications besides providing text books at subsidised rates for students from the secondary to post-graduate stage. Effective steps have also been taken to promote the Nepali language. Another example of the Government's commitment to meet the cultural requirements of the minorities is that of development and provision of the Alchiki script for the Santhali language.

At a time when communal forces control the levers of state power and are doing their best to promote communalism and impose their sectarian vision of a unitary form of culture, the Left Front Government stands out as a worthy example of defence of secularism, communal harmony, the rights of religious minorities and the promotion of the cultural needs and aspirations of different linguistic minorities.