INTRODUCTION

West Bengal had traditionally been the stronghold of the Communists and more particularly of the CPI(M) since 1964. The Communists were active in the State since the 1920s attempting to mobilise the large working class, which have come into being after the industrial development of the State, started in the second half of the 19th Century. The Communist movement in the State intensified after Independence and by the 1960s, the CPI and the CPI(M) have become a major force in the politics of the State. The radical elements within the CPI were much more stronger and hence after the split of 1964, the CPI(M) became the major Communist Party in the State. The Party suffered a major split soon after its formation, in 1969, but still managed to remain as the largest Communist Party in the State. The Party’s popularity was confirmed in 1967, when it was able to form the government for the first time along with other left and right parties. The Party used the governmental machinery for the purpose of mobilisation and it was able to increase its influence among the working population in the State. Similarly, the institutions were used in 1970 again for gaining popularity and mobilising support for the Party. The institutions could only be used in a limited way because of the limitations of the institutions itself and also because of the fact that the CPI(M) had alliances with some other political parties in the State, which were rightists political parties. Hence the control of the Party on this institutions was only a limited one, but it used it perfectly with all limitations and extended its base to many new areas for the first time.

After the fall of the governments, the Party relied mostly on direct form of agitations for the purpose of mobilisation till 1977. Direct form of agitation included strike actions and other forms of protest movements. The year 1977 can be regarded as an important year not only in the history of West Bengal but also in the history of India. The CPI(M) along with its other left partners after its subdued movements during the Emergency was able to return back to power along with its allies in 1977. The CPI(M) had remained in power in the State for more than two decades and this has enabled the Party to pursue radical policies with all its limitations for the mobilisation of the working class and the peasants. This is a strategy which it had used very effectively since 1977. It had in fact adopted a two-pronged strategy of mobilisation. The CPI(M) had pursued a strategy of mobilisation from below through agitations on economic and political
issues through its different mass organisations on the one hand and on the other hand it had used the parliamentary institutions, which is under its limited control for providing relief to the masses and thus bring the masses closer to the Party. The second strategy was also to facilitate mobilisation of the peasantry and the working class from below. In this endeavour the Party had achieved success if not significantly.

It is this strength of the Left movement in the State of West Bengal, which has drawn the attention of many scholars, both Marxists as well as non-Marxists. The Marxists like Franda, Nossiter, Biplab Dasgupta and others have demonstrated amply the mobilisation power of the CPI(M) in the State of West Bengal. Consider for example, this opinion of Nossiter in 1988:

...that they have learned by trial and error to utilise the whole apparatus of liberal democracy - elections, parties, parliament, level of governance from panchayat and municipality to province and federal structure itself to advance popular mobilisation in ways which were available to Lenin and the Bolsheviks and only hinted at by Marx.¹

This is a more general comment on the Communist movement in India but the author reaches this conclusion after having examined the mobilisation efforts of the CPI(M), particularly its effort in West Bengal. Authors like Atul Kohili have examined the efforts of the CPI(M) in utilising the “Red Panchayats” for mobilising the rural poor. However, criticisms are also not uncommon. Bhabani Sengupta, in 1972, remarked that the Indian Communists have made no significant contribution “to the pool of applied Communism”. The author, however, changed his position later in the second half of the 1970s. Ashok Rudra has also made a scathing comment on the CPI(M)’s utilisation of the institution available to it. A more recent critique of the Communist Party and its experiment in West Bengal, Ross Mullick says:

The Left Front experiment in West Bengal is now widely regarded by knowledgeable observers as a failure.

He adds further:

Given this record of failed reforms, non-reforms and regressive policies, the question remains as to how such a singularly unsuccessful government was able to achieve the world record for being the longest ruling democratically elected Communist government in history.

On the economic policy, which the CPI(M) in government is pursuing, he states:

With neither socialism nor capitalism developing, West Bengal fell economically behind more dynamic business oriented States. Communists work methods have

undermined socialist and capitalist development, both of which required productivity reform and efficient allocation of resources, rather than electoral patronage.  

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the Party is in power since the last twenty years in the State and it is evident that it has mobilised a large section of the masses with its two-pronged strategy of mobilisation. One thing is clear that in this mobilisation efforts, the CPI(M) had been more successful in the rural sector than in the urban sector. This is a result of the CPI(M)'s pro-rural policies throughout the year. The Party had to adopt rural oriented policies not only because of the size of the population in this sector but also because the Party realised from the very beginning that the agrarian sector was much more controllable than the industrial sector. It had achieved less success in the urban sector because it finds it difficult to control the industrial sector. This had resulted in the alienation of the workers in the long run particularly from the mid-1980s.

In the concerned jute industry, the work force employed had decreased considerably because of the retrenchment policy of the millowners. It employs more than two lakh workers mostly of non-Bengali origin. The CPI(M) and other political parties are mobilising these workers with the help of their mass organisations. The mass organisation which mobilises the workers for the CPI(M) is the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU). The BCMU had mobilised the jute workers around its grievances, which are mostly economic in nature. Political mobilisation has been done only to a limited extent. This is because of the problems in the leadership of the BCMU, little effort has been made to make the workers politically conscious. The CPI(M) only to a limited extent have achieved success in mobilising the jute workers in the industry through ministerial measures. Both these strategies have paid dividends but two points must be noted. The first is the popularity of the CPI(M) among the jute workers is on the decline. And, secondly it has failed to raise the level of political consciousness of the workers. The second point is a primary reason to a greater extent for the decline in the popularity of the CPI(M) among the workers.

In the present study, we have raised and answered the following questions:

1. What strategy or strategies the CPI(M) has used for the mobilisation of the jute workers in West Bengal? Whether this strategy or strategies conforms to the Marxist theory or not?

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2. What role have the mass organisation of the CPI(M), to be more specific the trade union organisation, the BCMU affiliated to the CITU play in mobilising the jute workers in the concerned industry for the Party?

3. What limitation/limitations the BCMU confronts in mobilising the workers in the concerned industry?

4. In what way the CPI(M) in government have used the parliamentary institutions available to it for providing relief to the jute workers and bringing the workers closer to the Party?

5. What limitation/limitations the CPI(M) in government faces in mobilising the workers through the above strategy?

6. And, finally how much success the CPI(M) have achieved in mobilisation?

CHAPTERISATION

The structure of the whole work has been designed, keeping in view the questions raised both theoretical as well as related to practice. The first chapter is a theoretical chapter in which the Marxists strategy or strategies of mobilisation has been analysed. This is by no means an exhaustive study but it in brief discusses the classical Marxists theory on mass organisation, particularly "trade unions" and "bourgeois parliamentary democracy". This is done, keeping in view, that the CPI(M) uses both its trade union wing (CITU) and the parliamentary institutions which are at its limited control and disposal since 1977 for the purpose of mobilisation.

After having discussed the theoretical questions related to mobilisation in the second chapter space is devoted to an understanding of the nature of capital and labour in the concerned industry. Understanding the strength and relative position of both is essential to understand the bargaining position of the labour vis-a-vis capital. In the third chapter, an attempt is made to analyse the politics of trade unionism by the BCMU, the largest union in the industry. This is done in three sections. In the first section, the issues around which the BCMU mobilises the workers is discussed. In the second section, the role of the BCMU in organising direct form of struggles in the industry had been analysed. And, finally in the third section, the problems which the BCMU confronts in mobilising have been analysed, along with the success which the BCMU have obtained in its effort of mobilisation.
The fourth chapter analyses the second strategy of mobilisation by the CPI(M), namely the strategy of mobilisation from above. The question tried to answer in this chapter is in what way the CPI(M) had used parliamentary institutions which is under its limited control for providing relief to the jute workers. This definitely would require a discussion of the CPI(M) government’s attitude towards labour in general because its attitude towards jute labour springs up from its overall approach. This question has also dragged us to a discussion of the industrial situation in the State, the industrial policy which the government have pursued and more particularly the limitations which the Left Front Government confronts because its control over the institutions in the State is only to a limited degree.

In the fifth and final chapter, we have taken the help of a case study to substantiate the arguments in our third and fourth chapters. The case of two jute mill towns have been taken; Bauria and Cbengail in the Howrah District, which is the location centre for five jute mills altogether employing around 20,000 workers. Both the strategies have been put to test with more emphasis on the first strategy of mobilisation that is through the BCMU.

By this time, the way should be clear for the conclusion. In the concluding chapter a summary of the whole discussion is made and the degree of success which the CPI(M) had achieved in mobilisation will be made along with the limitations or the problems which it faces in mobilising the workers.