

Book Review

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Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 2016

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Historically, the state of West Bengal has been seen as an aberration – an island of political stability – amidst a chaotic Indian democracy characterised by caste, religion and ethnicity based politics and frequent regime changes. West Bengal was ruled by the Left Front government – a coalition of left parties spearheaded by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M) – uninterruptedly from 1977 to 2011. The longevity of the CPI(M)/Left Front regime has sparked intense debates in the political echelons of the country, inviting a plethora of studies over the years, from economic to anthropological. Such studies have particularly been in vogue ever since the regime went down a path of steady electoral decline (circa 2008 onwards), eventually culminating in its exit from office in 2011 and the concomitant marginalisation of the left parties in the national political landscape.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya's *Government as Practice: Parliamentary Left in a Transforming India* can be seen both as a culmination of and break with this trend. It is a culmination in the sense of providing an almost grand narrative, commencing with the evolution of left politics in independent India, the formation of the Left Front government in 1977, its initial success in policymaking which gave way to a certain form, mechanism, and agency of political consolidation, leading up to the regime's denouement in 2011. And yet it departs from other major works on the theme, most of which the book duly engages with, in the fact that unlike most, it is not reactionary in nature. Neither does the book make the 'good governance' argument that is characteristic of earlier works such as Kohli's (1987, 1990) that praise land reforms and decentralisation, nor does it go down the other path that is sweepingly dismissive

of the same initiatives (like Mallick 1993, 1994); more importantly, it stays away from lamenting the ‘moral degeneration and ideological aberrations’ argument that has become the mainstay of recent works that are sympathetic to the left cause (such as Gohain 2011; Shankar 2011; Bose 2013). Instead, the focus remains on reconstructing the political history of the Left Front. What emerges in the process is a series of contradictions ‘which makes the process of governing unwieldy, demanding a dynamic use of tools for working daily through unknown, uncharted and unexpected contingencies’ (pp. 28-29). It is this process that the book elaborates upon as ‘government as practice’, interweaving a wider theoretical framework with a series of extensive village level ethnographic studies that examine the shifting nature of political dynamics in West Bengal over three decades.

One of the highlights of the book is its innovative use of a narrative style that is both thematic and linear, with chapters appropriately titled ‘inception’, ‘consolidation’, ‘agency’, ‘machinery’, and ‘implosion’. The text can be read through two interrelated and often cross-cutting lenses, which at one level offer a historical reconstruction of the rise, consolidation and dissipation of the parliamentary left in West Bengal, and at the same time shed light on the contradictions that characterise this history. It is the latter in particular that sets the book apart and which deserves closer attention.

The theoretical framework of ‘government as practice’ has been carefully positioned against the three strands of mainstream critiques of the CPI(M)/Left Front – the ‘functionalist’, the ‘structuralist’ and the ‘ideological’ – in a convincing argument that these critiques operate along a ‘logical binary in which certain conditions are acceptable as desirable or ‘pure’ while certain other are unwanted or ‘polluted’ (pp. 27-28), and that it is the slide of the regime from one end to the other that explains its collapse. Such claimed shifts include the shift from ‘good’ to ‘bad’ governance (the functionalist critique); from a sound and functioning structure with legitimate political agency to political clientelism and corruption (the structuralist critique); and from the idea of ‘revolutionary transcendence’ (over capitalism) to ‘empiricism’ (the ideological critique). In contrast, the book argues that governance is a process that evolves with practice and defies bipolarities, working its way through the messy terrain of myriad contradictions. It is this ‘messy’, or ‘heterogeneous and fluctuating’ (Laclau 2007) social reality that the book unpacks next, one which the Left Front had to negotiate with right from its inception via the interstices of four transitory political manoeuvres: (a) governmentalization of locality without localization of government (i.e. the government attempted to strengthen its presence in rural hinterlands, not through genuine democratic initiatives, but strengthening the

party apparatus in those areas instead); (b) granting token benefits to marginal groups without facilitating social mobility (marginal communities were engaged with mostly via lip-services and tokenism, while more fundamental/historical societal fissures, particularly along caste/ethnic lines, remained untouched despite the promise of progressive politics); (c) contingent action carefully coated by a rhetoric of vanguardism (i.e. the regime had a radical rhetoric, but took only restrained actions to maintain the political status-quo); and (d) an ideological cover and intellectual vulnerability (while the CPIM espoused a particular variant of Marxism as ‘authentic’, it was often challenged by other Left Front member parties over its interpretation). It is the shifting politics of negotiation with this series of anomalies that the book convincingly describes as ‘government by practice’. Here ‘good coexisted with bad, benefits with corruption and crass empiricization with transcendental ideology. The passage from one to the other...was made irrelevant by the continuous contamination of the congregated opposites’ (p. 31).

Chapter two provides a comprehensive critique of the Left Front’s most celebrated initiatives, the land reforms and democratic decentralisation through *panchayati raj* via a close reading of the official documents of the CPI(M), its peasant wing the *Krishak Sabha*, and various administrative wings of the government. In doing so, it also shows how these radical agendas were turned into a justifying act of maintaining pragmatic compulsions within the established ‘system’. This process of political consolidation via ideological double speak has been demonstrated in detail, underlining how the regime managed to maintain class ‘unity’ vis-à-vis its promise of sharpening class struggle. This resulted in only partial and incomplete reform measures that benefited the landed rich and middle classes over the sharecroppers and agricultural workers. Contrary to its revolutionary rhetoric, not only did the regime systemically weaken the representation of the poor, it also enabled the rise of a new breed of elite political leadership in its search for electoral predictability and stability. The book thus demonstrates how ‘continuing social exclusion and economic deprivation of the rural poor...’ indicated not only a devaluation but a ‘debasement of its ideological premises’ (p. 85).

In chapters three and four detailed ethnographic accounts are used to narrate changing political-economic conditions by examining two components of the regime: its original ‘foot soldiers’, and the operational styles of ‘party society’. To balance rhetoric with pragmatism the CPI(M) employed another of its mass organisations, the primary teachers association. Equipped with a certain degree of symbolic capital, the primary teachers emerged as veritable political leaders in the countryside during the early years of the regime, mediating society’s interaction with

government. This made them 'the prime agents of the left's government as practice' (p. 92). Later, changes in the geography of rural power gradually shifted control away from the teachers to another rising segment of petty entrepreneurs, namely traders and promoters.

Drawing on Chatterjee's description of 'political society' (2004, 2008), Bhattacharyya analyses what he calls the consolidation of 'party society' in rural West Bengal: A networked grid of 'intricate relationship between social classes and institutions in the countryside...evolving through decades of mutative government as practice' (p. 123). Party society came to embody the various contradictions of the regime as a coherent and disciplined party machinery continued to politically alienate the left's basic constituency (the rural poor), while remaining engaged in tokenism and a continuous effort to reproduce authority via reconciliation. The (in)famous electoral machine of the CPI(M) has thus been shown to further neither its original progressive agenda of a radical transformation, nor that of an inclusive politics to make the lower classes stakeholders of the social modes of power.

The final chapter turns to the last years of the regime and its aftermath, characterising the period as one where party society implodes, most brazenly visible during the events of forceful (and violent) land acquisition at Singur and Nandigram in 2006-07. The book provides a detailed account of both the material and discursive aspects of the final phase of the regime through a reading of its industrialisation initiatives and the seeds of contestation and protest. There is also an in-depth theoretical engagement, albeit somewhat abstract at times, with the complex facets of the neoliberal hegemonic order and the left's attempted negotiation with the same. Traversing from the modernised Marxism variant that left leaders espoused, to the notion of 'developmental terrorism' (Bhaduri 2007), 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003), the parochial efforts to accommodate the pre-capitalist production modes in India's 'passive revolution' (Forgacs and Hobsbawm, 2000; Chatterjee 1988), and an understanding of the evolving nature of 'postcolonial capital' (Sanyal 2007; Chakrabarty 2000), the book analyses both the conditionalities and externalities in the way political tools can be used to engage with a post-welfare capitalist order. In doing so, however, some of the context of the Left Front's industrialisation initiatives on the ground remain unexplored, including its limited negotiation efforts with its own stakeholders, a steady stream of rhetorical shifts ever since the inception of India's integration with the global economic order in 1991, and above all a contested understanding of economic strategies and alternatives.

While much more remains to be said about the trajectory of the Indian left over the years, this book provides a major contribution. It successfully escapes the trappings of criticising *what is*, and ventures into developing an understanding of *why and how* things came to be the way they are by unpacking the transformative process of governance itself. The book thus offers new theoretical directions for scholars working not only on West Bengal or the Indian left, but on the crisis of governability across the global South.

Beyond the theorisation of 'government as practice', there is a larger takeaway from this book, which is its diagnosis of the most critical fault line of the Indian left: its disengagement with society's 'inner domain'. The left has no option but to stand in solidarity with the 'struggle for recognition against all forms of exclusion, for minority rights...for ecological balance...for gender equality...for moral claims of the deprived against arbitrary legal regime' (pg. 48-49), and so on. It is only via an active persuasion to *politicise the social* that the left can make itself relevant.

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