

Abstracts Panel 34: Communism Compared

Confronting the 'Congress System' in West Bengal: Strategies of Political and Electoral Mobilization of the CPI in the 1950s

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The membership of the CPI in the country in 1946 stood at 53,000 out of which the bulk came from the trade union front. The party also had a considerable presence among the peasants since it was able to capture the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), which was mobilising the peasantry since its formation. The spread of its support region wise was however uneven. A good part came from Bengal. At the time of Independence in West Bengal as a whole Communists support was highly uneven across districts and classes. It was largely confined to the working class areas in and around the capital, Calcutta. When the CPI decided to contest the West Bengal Assembly elections in 1951 it was not the only Left party which contested. There were several other socialist forces that competed like the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the two factions of the Forward Bloc, the Bolshevik Party of India, the Socialist Party, and the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) etc. In the 1957 elections however the number of Left Forces that were in the electoral fray declined. Among the Leftists the CPI however clearly emerged as the leading one. The electoral strength and support of the CPI went on increasing. The CPI won 28 seats out of the 238 seats with

10.76 percent of the votes in 1951. In 1957 it won 46 seats out of 252 seats with 17.81 percent of the votes. Its performance in the parliamentary elections in the state was also remarkable. Out of the 15 seats which it won in 1952, 5 were from West Bengal. In 1957 the state supplied 6 of the 27 members which were elected to the Lok Sabha. This electoral as well as the social expansion of the CPI in the 1950s is remarkable considering that the Congress like elsewhere in the Country enjoyed dominance in the state in the 1950s and early 1960s. How was the CPI able to expand its social base in the state in the 1950s? What were the reasons behind its electoral expansion? What strategies it pursued to challenge the domination of the Congress in the state? These are the questions which the paper attempts to answer.

Malayali Communism. An Exploration of the Success of the CPI in Kerala in the 1950s

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This paper explores the origins of the electoral success of the CPI in Kerala in the 1950s. The literature has so far focussed on an explanation that highlights the attractiveness of the party to specific interest groups, in particular to workers and peasants and their ideologies. However, this paper will show that the party's appeal was much wider. The party tapped into an already existing public discourse about 'education and progress' that included demands for greater equality between members of different castes in religious, economic and social terms. While the forms of inequality significantly varied locally in the constituent parts of Kerala state, namely the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin and the Malabar Province that was formerly part of the Madras Presidency, the Communists were able to present a party manifesto that seemingly united the Malayalis in a common cause.

The non-secular foundations of the Left's electoral success in India: Comparing Kerala and Andhra Pradesh

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This paper is an attempt to answer the puzzle of why the Communist Party came to power only in Kerala despite the presence of comparable peasant movements and potential for politicization along class lines in both Kerala and Andhra Pradesh between 1920-1947. I bring out evidence to show that Kerala's Left party effectively translated non-programmatic appeals (caste, religion, language) into electorally viable cleavages. The scenario in 1921 after the Moplah riots necessitated the Congress party to take a more militant stance on both caste and class issues. The inability of the Congress leadership to work around the social and economic issues without disturbing its political base of upper caste-upper class landlords provided an opening for the Congress Socialist party to take up these issues and transform them into a socialist framework. This eventually laid the foundation for the emergence of the Communist party in Kerala. This transformation of 'several' caste, class and linguistic aspirations into a 'single movement' is unique to Kerala. A similar political conjuncture was not capitalized by the Left in Andhra because of the divisive politics of caste. If championing caste in Kerala was central to the success of the Left, in Andhra caste divisions wrecked its electoral fate. The Left in Andhra Pradesh could translate only language as an electorally viable cleavage until the 1952 elections. In addition strict programmatic appeals of the Left in Andhra failed to appeal to a broad electorate as in Kerala. This historical analysis will shift the focus from a reductionist understanding of the link between class, peasant movements and Communist party to the complex dynamic between the larger nationalist movement and the smaller caste, linguistic and peasant movements from 1920 to 1947. The inter-linkages between religious, cultural, literary and secular networks and the political parties in the pre 1947 period made a huge difference in the way the Communist party could translate episodic peasant mobilizations to larger movements and later into electoral success. I employ archival evidence and secondary research resources to support this explanation for the variance in the electoral success of the Left in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.

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