



Making things work in Bengal

Abhijit Banerjee Posted online: Mon May 16 2011, 03:52 hrs

A prominent leader closely connected to the Left told me something to the effect of, "I am not sure Buddha (Chief Minister Bhattacharjee) knows what he is doing — the middle classes love him now, but they will abandon him the moment anything goes wrong — on the other hand, cultivating big industrialists costs us with the people who have always been with the Left".

I am sure he would have much preferred to have been wrong that day to what actually happened subsequently, but he was an early proponent of a theory that I have heard from many others in recent years — that in Bengal, it is never a good idea to expose your left flank. Any idea, however meretricious, can achieve a certain amount of legitimacy in Bengal, it is said, as long as it is couched in terms of the opposed interests of the poor and some shadowy capitalist.

There is certainly something to this view. I hold no brief for the Salim Group, but the way their name got turned into an expletive in southern Bengal has to be a little bit frightening. Nevertheless, I am not sure Bhattacharjee had much of a choice. His first election as leader, we must remember, was 2001, when the Left squeaked through because the Congress and the Trinamool were fighting each other. The so-called Jyoti Basu strategy, that the Left should focus on agriculture and small-scale industry and largely ignore the rest, looked like it had run its course, in part because people like change, and in part because the Left seemed to have run out of ideas or at least lost its enthusiasm for pushing new ones. Most of the more important interventions into agriculture were over, it seems, by the mid-'90s, and from then on, the Left was increasingly relying on the lack of a credible opposition to win elections.

Bhattacharjee, anticipating that this could not go on forever, decided that it was his job to reinvent the Left as the party of industrialisation. It is not clear that he had much of a choice; the failure to create large numbers of the kind of stable well-paid jobs that come from large-scale industrialisation was West Bengal's most glaring failure. Despite the Left's oft-repeated claims about how Bengal leads the nation in job creation in the unorganised sector, it was clear to everyone including the man in the street, that this was to a significant extent a result of its inability to create the more desirable kinds of jobs.

The trouble was that the push to industrialise never really went anywhere. Even in the go-go years of 2006 to 2008, less than 30,000 jobs were created per year, according to the Left Front's own propaganda document. That is less than one job per every three thousand people in the state. Then, of course, Mamata Banerjee stepped in to derail the whole process and claim her place in history.

As irony would have it, her position right now is not unlike Bhattacharjee's in 2006. She comes riding in on hope, but as her predecessor just learnt, hope denied will bite you back. She is promising industrialisation, but nothing about the way she came to power suggests that it will be easy. She inherits all the reasons why the previous government did not get very far (bad infrastructure, a history of industrial conflicts, an unhelpful bureaucracy, an unsympathetic population) but adds to them her own peculiar liabilities: a reputation for being mercurial (to say the least), a history of ominous pronouncements ("only non-polluting industries in West Bengal"— what industry that employs blue-collar labour does not pollute a little?), the hostility of CITU activists, finally freed from the responsibility of being a governing party and most glaringly, a campaign founded on her success in chasing some prominent industrialists out of Bengal. The Trinamool manifesto promised reopening moribund PSUs, but the state will not (and probably should not) have the money to do very much in that direction.

My one suggestion to her government would be to start out by downplaying all the stuff about industrialisation (blame the unhelpful "Centre", the previous government's deplorable record, whoever) and emphasise that this will be a government of good governance and delivering to the people. This leverages her one great advantage over the Left — the fact that she is, as of now, less beholden to local power brokers — public sector unions, teachers associations, "dadas" and enemies of good governance more generally — and therefore can afford to take them on. It still will not be easy — these are people who have enjoyed power and influence for many years and will fight to protect them. To make matters worse, there are surely many among her own supporters who signed up precisely because they thought this was the way to become new local power brokers. But her reputation for being stubborn and ruthless might really help her here.

If she can actually make the state work better for the average person (teachers that teach, roads that don't get washed away, hospitals that work, ration shops that deliver, etc.), and equally importantly, manage to keep her ascendant supporters from getting involved in a civil war with the retreating troops of the Left, she will have another chance, as Nitish Kumar has shown us. And then industry will come calling.

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