

Law minister-CJ's verbal tiff

Both sides have merit

WE take note of the verbal exchange between the Law Minister and the Chief Justice, not merely as a riposte of the latter to the former's criticism of the performance of the judges but for the merit that both sides have in what they have articulated. The exchange occurred during the foundation laying ceremony by the prime minister of the Judges' Complex last Saturday

Although one would have liked these issues to have been much rather discussed in the confines of the four walls of the office, but, it is just as well that the opinions were expressed in public, since it has brought out the real problems that ail the judiciary.

The Law Minister has very rightly pointed out that the number of pending cases is very high. We feel that this could be reduced greatly with a little more diligence from the judges. The tendency to give dates without detail hearing, and to dispose of only a few out the listed ones, is the norm rather than the exception. The cause of justice as well the interest of the common man will be well served if the court hours are strictly followed, which, regrettably, is not so in many cases. And in delaying justice we are denying it to the aggrieved.

By the same token, there is no denying that there is a woe-ful shortage of judges at all levels of the judiciary as the Chief Justice has pointed out, and he must be complimented for reducing the number of pending cases substantially since his assumption of office. The judges must be accorded all facilities to dispense justice. It is unfair to expect quick disposal of cases when there not enough courtrooms for the judges to sit separately in. And, while we want expeditious disposal of cases, we cannot agree more with the CJ that justice hurried is justice buried.

It would be erroneous to think that these are matters for the judiciary or the law ministry alone to resolve. These are issues that affect the vast majority of those seeking redress of their complaints from courts, and which the law ministry as well as the judges ought to address immediately.

Meeting rising demand for food

Farming diversification needed

BANGLADESH needs to invest more on research to introduce improved varieties of seed for meeting the rising demand for foods, that too in the face of the negative impact of climate change. This was underscored by experts in a roundtable at the Daily Star on Saturday. They also suggested diversifying crops and focusing more on livestock and fishery sectors anticipating that people would consume less rice and spend more on other food items in the years ahead.

We could not agree more with the discussants. Bangladesh is one of the highest rice consumption countries in the world. Therefore the rice output has shot up over the last couple of decades bringing in its wake degradation of soil and fall in underground water table.

Consumption of rice has to be reduced and other food times like, maize, wheat and potatoes should be switched over to. Simultaneously, efforts must be directed to rapid development of livestock and fishery as alternative food sources.

For all this, we need a coordinated approach to focus on balanced use of fertilizer, increased production and use of pesticide, dissemination of already developed technologies and practices that require less water, fertilizer and integrated pest management approaches.

We shall also have to strengthen the institutional capacity of agricultural research agencies in putting together adaptation measures to secure and step up agriculture, livestock and fishery production by containing the effects of climate change.

In the ultimate analysis, we need to tackle the population growth if we are to feed increasing number of mouths on a sustained basis. To this end, incidence of poverty would have to be reduced in tandem with containing baby boom.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 16

1568

Mary, Queen of Scots, flees to England.

1822

Greek War of Independence: The Turks capture the Greek town of Souli.

1868

President Andrew Johnson is acquitted in his impeachment trial by one vote in the United States Senate.

1943

Germans crush Jewish uprising. Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto is over after a month of bloody fighting.

1948

Chaim Weizmann is elected the first President of Israel.

1960

Nikita Khrushchev demands an apology from U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower for U-2 spy plane flights over the Soviet Union thus ending a Big Four summit in Paris.

1966

The Communist Party of China issues the 'May 16 Notice', marking the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

1974

Dozens die as Israel retaliates for Ma'alot. Israeli planes bomb seven Palestinian refugee camps and villages in southern Lebanon.

1974

Josip Broz Tito is re-elected president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This time he is elected for life.

1975

India annexes Sikkim after the mountain state holds a referendum in which the popular vote is in favour of merging with India.

2005

Kuwait permits women's suffrage in a 35-23 National Assembly vote.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Was the Left fated to fail in West Bengal?



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)]-led Left Front's debacle in the State Assembly polls in West Bengal has

left many wondering not only about the future of the CPI(M), but also of Left politics in general in West Bengal as well as in other states like Kerala in India. The routing of the party's 34-year sway in West Bengal at the hands of the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamul Congress (TMC) seems to have shaken it at the base. The major partner of the Left Front, CPI (M) won only in 40 seats, down from 176 last time. It even lost this time by two seats to Congress, which won 42 seats and played a crucial role in TMC's victory.

How could that unthinkable happen? Is it the charisma of TMC leader Mamata or failure of the Left Front to deliver that has gone into the party's ouster from West Bengal?

The rallying cry of TMC before the election was one of change, while that of the Left Front was to continue the status quo with the Front in place. Mamata's call for change had certainly a better appeal than that of the Left Front, which claimed people's continued support for the incumbent. Evidently, such claim failed to create any appeal to the public. They might have become tired of seeing the Left Front so long in power. Moreover, the Left had also shifted markedly from its earlier hard-nosed ideological stance

in politics and its commitments to its constituency. The winds of global trend for free market economy and private capital also influenced Left Front's policies.

The Singur episode was a glaring instance of its unabashed pandering to the big capital of Tata in Favour industrialisation in West Bengal. Though it was part of its pragmatic tilt in politics, its traditional constituency started to look at it with suspicion. To them, it was a clear indication of capitulation and political opportunism. Though China, with the Communist Party having strong

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grip on society and politics, has succeeded in wooing international capital and achieving phenomenal development in the economy, one has to keep in mind that its government does not change through elections as practiced in the parliamentary democracies in India and in other countries that follow British or other Western models. So, the voters there are free to change their mind and exercise their will through voting the government they are not happy with out of power. That may be one of the reasons that the Left Front's experiment with capitalism has foundered on the electoral rock.

Some activists of the All India Students Association (AISA), the

student front of CPI (M), for example, have also expressed similar views about the fall of CPI (M)-led Left government in West Bengal. Speaking to pro-Left paper dailybhaskar.com, they maintained that the Left Front's increasing shift to right-wing politics did lead to their debacle. The CPI (M) had been serving the purpose of the ruling class and the privileged, the observed. The Left not only distanced themselves from their original politico-ideological agenda, but were also not willing to admit that, they added. In that case, it was not

surprising that their traditional voters were totally disillusioned with such role reversal of CPI (M). Added to this is the arrogance of power and sway that the party has been enjoying over the decades. Success had possibly gone to its head and that has been reflected even in its electoral rallying cry. Another issue that might have told upon the constituents' patience is the dual role of their favourite party -- pandering to the Congress at the centre, while playing the rival's role at the state level. Meanwhile, there has been a visible crack in the assured vote bank provided by the Muslim minority in the state of West Bengal. And the Trinamul Congress (TMC) of

Mamata Banerjee, on the other hand, has tried to fill in the gaps in the voters' base created by the Leftist party. Mamata aggressively made inroads into Muslim voters' base and evidently that has paid dividends in the long run.

The media did certainly play a big role. In fact, majority of the print as well as the electronic media also carried out an orchestrated propaganda against the Left Front government and in favour of TMC.

There is another dimension to the Left Front government's humiliating defeat. That has very much to do with governance. It is not only the opponents, even party insiders are pointing at the issue as well as allegations of corruption against it. All these issues have militated against the Left Front's prospect in the state assembly polls.

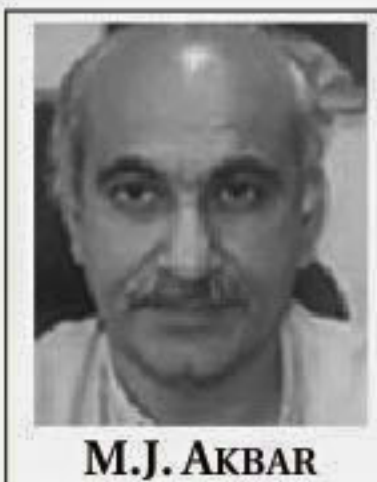
Now that Mamata Banerjee has swept the electoral board, it will now be her turn to deliver according to the promises she made before the elections. Whether she is a nine-day wonder in West Bengal's theatre of politics, time will tell.

It will now be the turn of the partners of Left front, the CPI (M), in particular, to go through a soul searching and identify the reasons for its defeat.

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BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

ONE of the more bewildering aspects of electoral democracy is the mesmerising power of false comfort. It stretches from

silly posturing to incomprehensible self-delusion, but nothing illustrates its meaninglessness better than the answer to an obvious question: what does a politician hope to achieve by denying a truth that is glaringly evident to everyone else, and will be officially confirmed within 48 or 72 hours? Nothing.

Perhaps this cocoon of illusion is the last hope of the doomed, as they seek desperately to postpone the date of execution in the hope of some miraculous reprieve. God does not waste His miracles on political parties.

In the brief interim between the last ballot and counting, the Bengal CPI (M)'s state committee gathered at party headquarters and reassured itself that it was winning at least 150 seats, or just enough to get a majority. Then they went public with this claim, in language that was hectoring, bullying and arrogant, as if they had distilled their principal character flaws into one last broadside.

The state chief Biman Bose, normally the most soft-spoken of men, promised that media would have to lick the spit they had hurled at his party after the results were known. Other leaders turned ballistic in the tirades against their object of hatred, Mamata Banerjee, heroine of the

subaltern that the Left had lost. They were crude, sexist, tasteless.

But this futile rage did serve to expose precisely why the CPM has lost power in Calcutta after 34 years. The party had become so blind and numb that it neither saw nor sensed that the ground had slipped beneath its feet. Unless there is some dramatic self-correction its behaviour in defeat could cost the CPM more than the defeat itself.

The Congress exercise in false comfort is far more subtle and effective. Unlike the Bengal CPM the Congress has learnt how to handle bad news. It

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hides the truth behind seven veils, and you can easily end up admiring the gauze. The facts are cold. Congress had a spectacular and well-deserved victory in one state, Assam, thanks to the splendid leadership of Tarun Gogoi, fared poorly in Kerala and was devastated in Tamil Nadu.

The Kerala Left, led by the remarkable V.S. Achuthanandan, almost turned the tide by decimating Congress targets in the UDF alliance. Congress won only 38 of its 82 seats, and had it not been for the state-specific Muslim League's 20 victories in the 24 seats that it contested, the

Left would have formed the government in Trivandrum. It was a consolidation of mosque and church that tipped the balance just barely towards the Congress-led UDF

In the old days a League leader Mohammad Koya would have demanded chief ministership as reward, and settled for Number 2 in the administration. But the League is now led by quieter types like E. Ahamed. Perhaps Prime Minister Manmohan Singh can say thank you by promoting Ahamed to cabinet in his next shuffle.

In Tamil Nadu, the Congress won

only five out of 63 seats it contested. The facile explanation will attribute this to association with the DMK. But the Congress has done everything it could to distance itself from DMK corruption, even sending A. Raja to jail. Its super-holy stance has been that neither friend nor foe would be spared.

The voter can see through gauze much more clearly than the psephologist or a journalist. The flatulent cynicism of both these tribes is such that they spread the notion that the DMK-Congress might even win because of caste arithmetic and money power. In other words, these

subsidiary ruling classes argued that the Tamil voter had been corrupted, and would therefore condone DMK corruption. This patronising view was an insult to the Tamil voter, who answered the insult by wrecking the DMK-Congress alliance.

Congress rode to 42 seats in Bengal on Mamata Banerjee's coat-tails, so any congratulations are misplaced. The Congress vote has declined across the country, apart from Assam. The electorate is hugely unimpressed by Rahul Gandhi's personally selected list of hand-picked "youth" candidates, who were generally pulped.

Achuthanandan's dismissive tag for them, of "Amul babies," will stick until they provide evidence that they have grown up. And Jagan Reddy's triumph in Andhra Pradesh is proof that the party has nowhere to hide in what used to be the party's fortress.

The one genuine bit of comfort for the Congress is the fact that its main opponent, the BJP, has been denied the consolation of even false comfort. It was minced in Assam and could not pick up a serious seat in Bengal or the South. New forces, regional and sub-regional, are rising to pick up the slack left behind by national parties. A process that accelerated in the 1990s has gathered fresh energy.

The big boys will recover, but only if they accept a basic truth: alibis are a balm, not a medicine.

The columnist is Editor, The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.