

Review of the May 2001 Assembly Elections
Adopted in the August 11-12, 2001
Meeting of the Central Committee

The elections to some assemblies in May 2001, though confined to four states and one union territory had acquired national importance. This was so because this was the first major test for the two year old NDA govt. Two important allies of the BJP, the ruling DMK in Tamilnadu and the ruling AGP which opportunistically joined the NDA in the last minute were facing the elections.

The two states ruled by the Left, West Bengal and Kerala also went to the polls. The BJP openly declared that in both these states its primary objective would be to defeat the Left. Towards this end it publicly declared its willingness to have adjustments with everybody. This is natural because the Left alone is a consistent opponent of its policies and is working towards forging an alternative at the national level.

The results of these assembly elections have struck a significant blow to the BJP and the NDA. The massive defeat of the BJP and its allies clearly reflect the people's discontent and disapproval of the Vajpayee led NDA's policies and performance. In all the states, the BJP's vote share has declined substantially. The BJP could not win a single seat in both West Bengal and Kerala. It was badly mauled in all the three by-elections to the Lok Sabha, losing its sitting Trichy seat in Tamilnadu.

West Bengal

The victory of the Left Front for the record sixth time with a two-thirds majority in the West Bengal assembly elections is a significant event. It took place at a time when the reactionary BJP-led government is in office at the Centre whose hostility to the Left Front government is well known. All the ruling class forces ganged up to project the Trinamul Congress and its leader Mamata Banerjee as the popular choice. This campaign was backed up with a vicious plan of violence targetted at the CPI(M) which was put in place well before the assembly polls. Practically the entire print and electronic media was mobilised for a slanderous anti-Left campaign.

The 13th assembly elections in West Bengal saw a determined effort to dislodge the Left Front from office. Having failed in five successive elections to defeat the Left Front, there was an element of desperation in the anti-Communist and reactionary forces in the state. Their plans for the elections went beyond the realms of an electoral struggle. It should be noted that during the last 24 years of Left Front government more than 3500 workers of the CPI(M) have been murdered. For these elections with the BJP in power at the Centre, the Trinamul hatched a plan more than a year ago to physically attack the CPI(M) and its bases. Gangs of goondas armed with guns were utilised in a region covering border areas from the three districts of Midnapore, Bankura and Hooghly. Villages were "liberated" and in a matter of a few months, more than 100 CPI(M) workers were murdered; thousands of houses torched and property looted. The Panskura bye-election was held in this background and the success of the Trinamul-BJP candidate there emboldened them to try and extend these tactics.

At the same time with the slogan of Kamtapuri, terrorist gangs began a campaign of terror and murder against the CPI(M) cadres in Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal. All this was being done under the cover of a high pitched campaign against the "CPI(M)'s terror tactics" and the demand for Central intervention.

The Party had to meet this offensive politically and organisationally. It was able to regain the initiative in the terror hit regions of Midnapore and to mobilise the rural

poor to fight back the jotedar-anti social combine.

The Trinamul Congress consistently strove for an all-in unity against the Left Front in West Bengal. But with the Tehelka episode there was a sudden change in the alignments. The Trinamul Congress broke its alliance with the BJP after the seat-sharing had been decided between them and went in for an alliance with the Congress party. Throughout the election campaign, the Trinamul did not announce a complete break with the NDA. The Congress party agreed to join the Mamata led anti-Marxist combine even while the Trinamul refused to categorically sever relations with the NDA. This opportunist combine of the Trinamul and the Congress was successfully exposed by the Party and the Left Front in its campaign.

The anti-people proposals in the Union Budget also helped the Left Front to put the Trinamul Congress-BJP combine on the defensive. This may have also influenced the Trinamul Congress to seek a change in its alliance partner.

The harmful effects of the central government's policies have their full impact on West Bengal too. The Left Front government had to function under the overall framework of the policies of liberalisation and privatisation which have aggravated the problems of West Bengal's economy. As in the rest of India, unemployment is a serious problem. The withdrawal of the state from public investment and the dismantling of the public sector has badly hit the industrial scene in the state. It is in this background that the CPI(M) and the Left Front conducted the election campaign. We had to expose the Centre's anti-people policies, highlight the pro-people policies of the Left Front government despite the constraints of the state government. We had to warn against the communal forces and the threat from the terrorist-authoritarian-anti-Left combination. The political campaign helped to rally people behind the Front.

In contrast, the vituperative and hate-filled anti-Communist campaign of Mamata Banerjee forewarned even the non-committed sections of the people about the violence and authoritarianism which would follow if she came to power. This led to many uncommitted sections coming forward to support the Left Front. The Trinamul Congress concentrated its attack on the CPI(M) and did not utilise the BJP or the Vajpayee government.

The review undertaken by the West Bengal State committee has underlined the positive features which favoured the Left Front campaign. The unity of the partners in the Left Front was greater compared to the past and there was united working among the Left Front partners at various levels. Flood relief work undertaken by the Party was appreciated by the people especially when Mamata Banerjee had dismissed the massive flood damage as "man-made". Finally, the way Comrade Jyoti Basu stepped down from the Chief Minister's post on health grounds after 24 years in office and the acceptability of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya as the new Chief Minister among the people enhanced the Party's prestige and had a positive impact on the election.

The efforts by a small group of Party members who went out of the Party challenging the ideology and discipline of the Party was successfully countered by the state leadership. The group who named themselves Party of Democratic Socialism was fully backed by the bourgeois media in the hope that they would be able to disrupt the CPI(M)'s election prospects. The firm and patient approach of the state leadership prevented this group from making any headway among our supporters. As a result they were routed and unable to save their deposit even in one seat.

The Left Front polled 49% (actual 48.99%) of the vote. There is a slight decline of 0.33% compared to the 1996 assembly elections when the Front polled 49.32%. In 1996, the Congress (which was united) and its ally the Jharkhand Mukthi Morcha got 39.69%. This time, the Congress-Trinamul-Jharkhand alliance got 39.45%. The BJP

got 5.19% compared to 6.45% in 1996.

The analysis made by the state committee shows that by and large the Party has maintained its support base among the agricultural workers, the share croppers and the rural poor. The review stresses the necessity to strengthen work among the agricultural workers and raise their political consciousness. The strong base among the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is reflected in the fact that the Left Front won 48 out of the 59 SC seats (i.e. 80%). In the ST seats, the Left Front won 16 out of the 17 seats.

In the working class areas, we have won 42 seats as against 49 last time. The industrial crisis affecting a large number of industrial units has had an adverse impact. The workers still expect the Left Front government to remedy the problem of closures, even though we have campaigned about the ill-effects of liberalisation policies followed by the Central government.

The Party has received the support of the Bengali Muslims based on their class affinity with us. Among the non-Bengali Muslims too, the Party received good support except in some areas. There was a campaign by Muslim fundamentalists against us in certain areas.

Though the Kamtapuri separatist forces failed to win any seat in North Bengal, their presence and activity cannot be ignored. We will have to continue the campaign against their separatist and disruptive platform while addressing the genuine problems of the Rajbhanshi people.

The BJP's overall voting percentage declined. But they were able to improve their vote in some districts like Purulia and Nadia. They will seek to entrench themselves among certain sections with the help of the RSS and its allied organisations. Given the anti-Communist gang up in West Bengal and the prevailing correlation of forces nationally, we must continue to attack their communal platform seriously. We must take organisational steps to counter their activities and influence.

There is a substantial section of Hindi-speaking working people staying in West Bengal. They are mainly in the unorganised sector. The Party has to make special efforts to draw them into the mass organisations and to extend our political influence amongst them.

The review of the West Bengal state committee has pinpointed some of the organisational weaknesses that need to be overcome:

- (i) A section of the working people have turned away from us and become hostile. This is due to the unprincipled behaviour in some panchayat's leadership or wrong functioning on the part of our cadres. We must identify such cases and patiently work to win back the confidence and support of such people who have been alienated.
- (ii) We must overcome the reluctance to organise the agricultural workers and pay attention to develop their political consciousness. Similar initiative has to be taken to draw unorganised workers into the organised movement both in the towns and villages.
- (iii) There is erosion in the observance of communist norms and democratic centralism within the Party organisation. There have also been instances of factional squabbles regarding selection of candidates. It is necessary to conduct a struggle against such wrong trends.

To this must be added what has been stressed in earlier reviews of our political work.

Being in government for two and a half decades, the basis exists for the characteristics of the "ruling party" within the bourgeois set up seeping into the Party at all levels. We must constantly guard against it. Our links with the people and the

behaviour of our cadres towards the people must meet the standards of a communist approach. It is this trait which has helped the Party in West Bengal to tide over many challenges in the past. The principle of serving the people and learning from them must be preserved and nurtured.

We must not forget that nearly 50% of the people are with the ruling class parties. We must function in the government and orient the Party's work in such a way as to win over the maximum number of the people, the bulk of whom are poor.

Here the role of the Party is crucial. We should listen to the views of the non-Party masses. We must remember that any act of favoritism, misuse of power or corrupt practice in handling government resources or public funds alienate us from sections who should be our base. In panchayat, municipal and government functioning, the Party must constantly monitor and check such wrong trends.

Finally, the review of the West Bengal state committee shows that a number of young men and women and new supporters have been enthused and activated in the election campaign. The party should take necessary steps to draw them into the organisation and educate them politically and ideologically.

Kerala

The defeat of the LDF in Kerala has been a disappointing one not only for the members and sympathisers of the Party but also for the entire Left, democratic and secular forces in the country. How this has happened is a matter of great concern for them. The Kerala state committee has finalised its election review report after two rounds of discussion in the state committee and also in the district committees. The CC wants to emphasise the following aspects which have already been noted and considered by the Kerala State Committee.

The most important factor is the stagnation of the independent strength of the Party in Kerala during the last four decades. The undivided Communist Party polled about 40% of the votes in 1960. It is not possible to assess the exact percentage of votes polled by the CPI(M) during the subsequent years as the Party contested the elections in alliance with other parties. The percentage of votes polled by the CPI(M) and allies fluctuated between 42 and 52% depending on the number of allies and their relative strength.

It was in Kerala that the Communist Party formed its first state government in 1957. Subsequently, alongwith allies, the CPI(M) formed united front governments on four occasions. The Party had forged alliances with the Indian Union Muslim League, a section of the Congress led by A.K. Antony, different factions of the Kerala Congress, Janata Dal and Left parties like CPI and RSP. Now the CPI(M), CPI, RSP, Janata Dal, Kerala Congress (J) and NCP are constituents of the LDF.

The Party and the LDF governments have creditable achievements such as the successful implementation of the land reform measures within the constraints of the Constitution, social welfare measures, strong and wide spread public distribution system, in education and public health, self sufficiency in power production, decentralisation of powers to panchayati raj institutions, people's participation in planning and execution of the development activities etc. Despite all these achievements, the innumerable struggles conducted by the Party and the mass organisations and the electoral tactics of united front, the fact that the Party has not been able to make any advance, is a serious matter that has to be addressed by the Party. If the Party in Kerala fails to address this serious problem and appropriate remedial measures are not taken, it would not be possible even to sustain the present strength.

The LDF votes have come down from 44.69% in the 1996 election to 43.70% in the

2001 election. On the other hand, the UDF polled 49.17% of votes which is 5.59% more than the votes polled by the UDF in 1996. The UDF vote is 5.5% more than the LDF vote. This is more than the usual one or two per cent difference between the two fronts. The Kerala state committee admits in its review report that a section of our supporters went away from us. The Party should take adequate steps for bringing back the sections of kisans, agricultural workers, workers in traditional industries such as coir, handloom, cashew nut, toddy tapping, middle class employees etc who went away from us. The state committee also should make efforts to expand our influence among these sections. It should be the main endeavour of the Party in Kerala to address the serious issue of expansion of the Party among the masses, and particularly among the minorities. It cannot be obsessed only with the issue of electoral tactics alone in effecting a change in the alignment of political parties in favour of the Left Democratic Front. The sole issue cannot be the by winning over of more parties so that the LDF can again come to power.

It is a fact that all the communal and casteist forces rallied behind the UDF for defeating the LDF. The BJP successfully transferred a considerable portion of its votes to the UDF to see that the LDF is defeated in the election.

The state review report states that the casteist forces can not only rally their supporters but also can influence a section of our supporters. The growth of the caste influence in Kerala after the long years of activities of social reform movements and Left parties is a very serious matter. Failure to politically educate our masses and the weaknesses in conducting political propaganda among the masses behind the communal and casteist forces in order to win over them can be a reason for the emergence of the present situation. The Party has to evolve effective tactics in reaching the masses rallied around caste leaders by taking up economic and social issues and also by exposing the vested interest of the leadership.

As stated in the review report, the conditions of the minorities in Kerala is different from other states. The Muslims and the Christians constitute about 43.65% of the total population in Kerala. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims are rallied around the IUML. Majority of the Christian minority are rallied in different factions of the Kerala Congress. They have enjoyed power in state government either with the LDF or with the UDF during the past years. A relatively modern bourgeois section is emerging among the Christian minority. The flow of Gulf money has also facilitated the emergence of a neo-rich section among the Muslim minorities in addition to the landlords and traders. These richer sections have vested interest in schools, colleges, private hospitals, hotels, contracts etc.

The Indian Union Muslim League has been able to consolidate overwhelming majority of the Muslim organisations under their umbrella and carried them to the UDF. The influence of the fundamentalist forces are growing among the Muslims. The Christian church is taking up the various socio-economic issues of the people in order to maintain their influence over the Christian minorities.. The long debate in the party about entering into adjustment or alliance with the Indian Union Muslim League or not, the weakness in making effective criticism against the IUML leadership, the failure of the Party to win over the confidence of the Muslim masses and other factors have enabled the IUML to carry the overwhelming majority of the Muslim masses with them is an aspect that has to be looked into. The question of electoral tactics can be decided at the appropriate time after assessing the then concrete political situation. That should not in any manner disarm the Party from conducting political and ideological propaganda among the masses belonging to these minority parties and exposure of their bankrupt leadership.

The Party should give sufficient priority for its expansion among the minorities. For this a separate discussion should be organised by the state committee on our

approach to the minorities, with the help of the Party Centre

The electoral understanding with the Indian National League during the assembly elections created some confusion. The statements of the leaders giving different versions of the understanding also contributed to the confusion.

There are many reasons for the erosion of our mass base in Kerala. It is now an undisputed fact that the financial difficulties faced by the government during the last year and particularly during the last months have alienated a considerable section of the people from the LDF. As stated by the review report of the Kerala state committee, every state government would take adequate measures to see that the treasury transactions are not disturbed or stopped at the time of elections. It was also a serious lapse that the interests of the poorer sections such as the agricultural workers, workers in the traditional industries such as coir, handloom, cashew, toddy tapping, fishing and handicapped and widows were forgotten.

Out of the seven ministers, six were state secretariat members. The state secretariat is collectively responsible to ensure that things are managed properly and efficiently. The finance minister himself was the leader of the fraction of the ministers. It cannot be said that the finance minister has discharged his responsibility with sufficient care and attention as he ought to have done. It was his responsibility to bring the seriousness of the matter both before the state secretariat and state committee. It is strange that the Party state committee was not equipped to face such a serious situation. The state secretariat should have shown sufficient vigilance on such matters. It was the responsibility of the state secretariat to see that the fraction of the ministers and the ministry level subcommittees were properly functioning. There is a strong criticism that the Party failed to review the performance of the government and the ministers.

As already stated in the state committee's review the new liquor policy which was implemented resulted in alienating a section of our traditional votes. This policy which was meant to curb the malpractices of the liquor lobby should not have been hastily implemented.

A socio-economic change is taking place in Kerala due to various factors. The Party has to study the different aspects of this change and evolve suitable tactics. The Party in Kerala has no dearth of cadres to address this important task.

The state Party leadership took some steps for fighting against factionalism and for unifying the Party. The state party made some progress on this score. But it should not be forgotten that the damage inflicted by factionalism has not yet been healed and all factional trends have not been eradicated. The Party leadership should continue its efforts for unification. Partisan and vindictive attitude should be avoided.

The leakage of the discussions in the state secretariat and the state committee and the publicly aired different voices of the Party leadership are adversely affecting the credibility of the Party as not having a cohesive leadership. Instead of thrashing out the differences through discussions inside the Party, the Party leaders and members have no right to express their differing views outside. The PB and CC members in the state should act as role models. A conscious effort should be made to strengthen the collective functioning through democratic discussions. All comrades should feel that the decisions are taken after free and frank discussions in the Party on all important issues.

The state committee has a wide network of publications and media centres. The leadership in Kerala should politically and ideologically intervene on all important issues and project our positions and alternatives before the masses. Collective efforts should be made on this important matter. The Party should devote enough time and

attention on this matter. This is one of the main tasks of the state secretariat and state committee.

The big increase in the Party and mass organisation membership during the last three decades have no relation or relevance to the strength, expansion and influence of the Party. The factionalism in the Party also contributed to this. The state Party should make a serious scrutiny about the membership of the Party and weed out all ineligible and inactive members who cannot be trained or improved. The mass organisations also have a large inactive membership. It is also said that some of the members are not even aware that they are members.

There are complaints and counter complaints about the violation of the principles of relations between the Party and mass organisation. The Party at all levels should examine this aspect and rectify the wrong practices.

The failure of the Party to assess the mood of the masses is magnified in the statement of the state secretariat after the polling, asserting that the LDF would get 75 seats. The state Party should examine how this big gap exists between the masses and the Party despite the vast network of Party and mass organisations and their large membership.

The bourgeois media and our enemies have made use of some isolated incidents such as in the University College at Thiruvananthapuram, Nadapuram, Papinisseri etc. for tarnishing the prestige of the Party. The bourgeois media and the enemies are trying to create an impression that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is not different from other political parties. The Party should always seek to project our distinct identity as a party of the working class and toiling masses.

The state committee admits in its review report that the life style of certain comrades is similar to that of the bourgeois political leaders. Among the people also there is a feeling that the distinction between communists and others is getting blurred. The Party should make a serious introspection and take necessary steps for rectification. The common people are generously contributing to the Party fund. Sufficient care and attention should be shown to its expenditure at all levels.

There are criticisms about the assets of certain comrades that they are disproportionate to their known sources of income. There are also criticisms about certain comrades that they regularly collect funds from tainted businessmen. The party should immediately examine such complaints and take appropriate action. Any liberal attitude in such matters will corrode the communist qualities of our Party.

The Party in Kerala has a powerful and wide mass base. The CC is confident that the shortcomings and weaknesses would be overcome soon and enable the Party to make further advance.

Tamilnadu

In Tamil Nadu the ruling DMK-BJP combine suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the AIADMK-led alliance. The NDA's defeat in the state was a resounding one, so much so that even in the state capital Chennai, which has always been a DMK stronghold, the DMK had a tough time. The discontent against the DMK-BJP combination was so much that the AIADMK could rally all the other opposition parties to defeat this combination. As against a strong AIADMK-led alliance, the DMK led front was weakened with the exit of the PMK and the MDMK from its alliance.

Though it was the discontent against the DMK-led front that was the main factor contributing to its defeat, the rejection of the nomination papers of Jayalalitha also roused the people against the DMK leadership. The issue of corruption while remaining a major issue of concern failed to become an electoral issue as the people saw the DMK and tehelka-tainted BJP in the same light.

The AIADMK won 133 seats giving it an absolute majority. The DMK could win only 28 seats. The AIADMK and its allies polled 49.79% of the vote while the DMK-led front got 38.13% of the vote.

Our Party has won six out of the eight seats that it contested, a gain of four seats from what we held in the last assembly. We polled 1.68% of the votes. Our victory in Perambur (Chennai City -- a DMK stronghold) assumes importance as we have not won any seat from the city since 1952. Unfortunately, we lost Thiruvaur, a traditional stronghold of the Party by a small margin of 1314 votes. A major reason being the contest by an expelled district secretariat member. As an independent he polled 2375 votes which affected our chances. In Thiruverumbur, which we lost by a bigger margin, we got lesser votes in the working class areas. We must self-critically examine the work of the Party and the trade union front in this belt. The intervention of the PB helped the Tamilnadu state committee in adopting a correct tactical line.

Pondicherry

The major contending parties in Pondicherry were the Congress-TMC and the DMK front. The AIADMK could not arrive at an understanding with the Congress-TMC as it had already arrived at an understanding with the PMK. Despite the fact that there was no agreement between the forces opposed to the DMK-BJP alliance, it was defeated. With the AIADMK supporting the Congress, a Congress ministry has been sworn in.

Our Party had no major role to play in Pondicherry. Earlier we had some influence in one part of Pondicherry, Mahi, which is territorially in Kerala. We however, never made any serious effort to develop the Party there.

Assam

The opportunism displayed by the AGP and the BJP by going in for a last minute adjustment, failed to yield any dividend to the two parties. The ruling AGP deserted the earlier four party combination on the eve of the election and aligned with the BJP. The new AGP-led alliance also included the ABSU and the ASDC(U). The AGP-BJP combine suffered a massive defeat in these elections. The combine has secured 40 seats with the AGP getting 20 and the BJP 8. The AGP's vote share has come down from 29.70 percent in the 1996 elections to 18.63, while the BJP's share has come down from 33.6 per cent in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections to 8.04.

The CPI(M) contested 22 seats but was not able to win in any. It came second in 2 constituencies and lost deposit in 17 constituencies. It polled a total of 1,89,000 votes. In the last assembly it had two representatives in the assembly. The CPI too failed to win any seat. For the first time since 1952, there will be no Left representative in the assembly. The CPI(M), CPI and the Samajwadi Party formed a separate alliance and contested the elections.

The coming together of the AGP and the BJP was quite natural, given the fact that the AGP was much more closer to the BJP ideologically than with the parties with which it was in alliance earlier. The steady erosion in the support base of the AGP was evident for some time. Its bad governance, corruption, misdeeds of the government and failure to ensure peace had alienated the people. This disenchantment and discontent was reflected in the last two Lok Sabha elections in which the AGP failed to win a single seat from Assam. The AGP's Assamese base is getting eroded benefiting the Congress. With the BJP aligning with the AGP it lost its credibility and perception as an alternative to the AGP. The alliance between the two parties was resented by the rank and file of both parties. The BJP had to contend with a mini-rebellion in its ranks.

Our Party had to pay the price for its earlier association with the AGP. While

extending outside support to the AGP-led government, despite sharp ideological differences, we could not effectively demarcate ourselves from the AGP and assert our independent position. Both inside and outside the assembly we could not forcefully protest and resist the anti-people policies of the AGP government. More importantly, when the climate is not conducive, we should not have contested 22 seats. We should, instead have concentrated our energies in a lesser number of seats.

In all the states where we participated in the elections, organisationally, due attention should be paid to draw in the new activists thrown up in the campaign into the mass organisations and the Party. In the weaker states, past experience shows that we often fail to consolidate the new contacts and influence that we acquire during the elections. The state committees should provide the necessary direction for organisationally consolidating the influence which we have gained in the areas where we contested the elections.

The decisive defeat of the BJP and its allies in these elections have left a direct impact on the ruling coalition at the Centre. The NDA alliance continues to be wobbly with the opportunistic entry and exit at will of various parties like Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and the PMK in Tamilnadu. Clearly, there is no shadow of doubt left about the fact that these parties are primarily together because of their lust of power and eagerness to share the spoils of office. While the credibility of the Vajpayee-led NDA continues to plummet, the coming elections in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and elsewhere are bound to see a further erosion of this credibility.