

WB

Was Jyoti Basu Implementing French Socialists' Programme of Marseilles Congress, 1892

by Chandra Bhan Prasad :

" A workers' party has to fight, in the first place, on behalf of the wage-workers, that is, for the male and female servantry and the day labourers. It is unquestionably forbidden to make any promise to the peasants which include the continuance of the wage slavery of the workers. But as long as the big and middle peasants continue to exist as such they cannot manage without wage workers. If it would, therefore, be downright folly on our part to hold out prospects to the small-holding peasants of continuing permanently to be such, it would border on treason were we to promise the same to the big and small peasants"..... Frederick Engels

The above quote is from Engels' "**The Peasant Question in France and Germany**". Editors of the volume [**Karl Marx & Engels Selected Works**] describe the essay as "*a major Marxist work on the agrarian question*". The note adds: "*Engels was also prompted to write this work by his striving to correct the mistakes committed by the **French Socialists**, who deviated from **Marxism** and made concessions to opportunists in their agrarian programme adopted in **Marseilles in 1892** and supplemented in **Nantes in 1894**".*

What is that Marseilles programme, why did Engels criticize it, and in what way is that related to **Jyoti Basu's** regime of over two decades in WB?

First the first question. The **French Workers' Party** had organized its **10th Congress in Marseilles** [September 24-28, 1892]. On the agenda was, amongst several others- "*to secure the support of the peasantry in the forthcoming parliamentary elections*". Keeping that in mind, the Congress adopted an agrarian programme. The programme sought to mobilize peasantry-rich, middle, small, and **metayers** {**share-croppers**}, against Big Land Lords. **But why was Engels upset over the programme?**

The Congress, in its zeal to secure support of the majority of electorates, *excluded "Day Labourers"* or, in our lexicon, landless agricultural labourers from its programme, and sought to unite their adversaries, who employed them and exploited. The resolution was heavily loaded in favour of **metayers and peasantry**, who too employed Day Labourers. In fact, the programme had even tried to rationalize its support to *metayers* by stating:

" expedient to extend this protection also to the producers who as tenants or share croppers [metayers], cultivate land owned by others and who, if they exploit day labourers, are to certain extent compelled to do so because of the exploitation to which they themselves are subjected".

Engels targets this aspect of programmes and asserts: " as the sentence reads now, in its unlimited general form, it is a direct violation not only of the French Programme but also of the fundamental principle of socialism in general..."

What had disturbed Engels even more, though he didn't doubt intentions of French leadership was, their desire to face parliamentary elections by compromising Socialist principles.

The *Marseille* programme was a clever ploy or in words of Engels, "opportunistic" move to challenge big landlords, numerically a minority, and unite peasantry, including powerful *metayers*, to win elections. The decision to exclude landless agricultural labourers was aimed at appeasing peasantry, and *metayers* as both formed electoral majority. The electoral arithmetic was obvious - unite majority against the minority- oppose big landlords to retain 'socialist' pretensions, but drop the landless, or the agrarian proletariat, electorally least significant.

Jyoti Basu's "Operation Metayers" in West Bengal

Metayers in French, *Barghadar* in Bengali, and *Share Croppers* in English, all the three have the same meaning. The Left Front's much celebrated **Operation Bargha**, launched in 1978, and repeatedly described by Left intelligentsia as the most '*radical piece of land reforms*' in India, appears a sort of straight lift from the *Marseille* resolution of **1892**.

As we know, the WB economy had witnessed industrialization much earlier than in rest of India, resulting in speedy growth of Secondary and Tertiary Sectors. This resulted in large scale migration of Workers to urban centers in the state. In as early as 1971, **53.25** per cent of WB Main Work Force was settled in Secondary and Tertiary sectors, where as twenty year later in 1991, figures for all India level in the two sectors remain as low as 37.83. Contrary to the all India trend, landlords even upon evolving into '*Bhadraloks*' in urban centers, retained their stakes in agrarian assets. Absentee land-ownership had become a phenomenon by '70s', and giving further impetus to Barghadari, a traditionally established pattern in WB.

The peasants, who evolve into a *Bargha* are, by definition those who owned farm equipments, money to invest in fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, irrigation etc. and, muscle power to guard the crops. Barghas had acquired so much of clout by mid-70s' that they also turned into money lenders, lending money to quasi-Bhadraloks of rural Bengal, who at times would mortgage their lands to their own *Barghas*. Thus, *Barghas*, like today's Yadavas, Kurmies, Lodhs, Gujjars, Jats of Hindi-heart land, along with rich and middle peasantry of the similar social origin, ruled the rust in WB countryside. Like Hind-heart land's neo-Kulaks, *Barghas*, rich and middle peasantry in WB were seeking legal ownership over land, looking for a platform to take on to land lords politically. The Left Front under CPI[M] saw it a God's sent opportunity.

The Left Front realized that the anti-Emergency sentiments cannot last long, chose the *Marseille* way- target the Big land lords, and unite, along with *Metayers*, the rich and middle peasantry, who ruled the rust in the French countryside. Here in WB, Left Front's task was even easier- it had to fight the "absentee land lords", who were physically absent and mattered least in an electoral battle.

A year before capturing power on anti-emergency sentiments, CPI[M], the leading constituent of the Front, had already divorced its 'Communist' pretensions. Party's resolution in 1976 had cautioned that the

"Land re-distribution" slogan should not be made into **"Slogan of Action"**. Resolution stressed on "wages for rural workers, the issue of rent reduction, the abolition or scaling-down of peasant indebtedness, fair prices for agricultural produce, reduction of tax burdens...". As resolution suggests, the "rural workers" were not to be given land, and instead, fair wages .

The CPI{M}'s entire game plan is illustrated by Atul Kohali's in his "West Bengal: Parliamentary Communism and Reform from Above" [**State and Poverty In India, Cambridge University Press, London, 1987**]. While tracing CPI[M]'s *kisan* ideology, Kohali refers to Pramode Dasgupta's speech at the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Kisan Sabha in 1979, where argued that

" the only way to gain the support of all the peasantry, "*rich or poor*", was to pay attention not only to the "land question" but also to the issues of "irrigation, seeds, and fair prices for the produce"

Kohali reproduces part of his conversation with a CPI[M] MLA, where he opined that " the only class of individuals to be isolated are "*big jotedars*"- the class of large and often absentee landowners". So reactionary the CPI[M] had become by mid '70s' that it wanted to fight only the 'absentee' land-lordism', and "seek support of largest land owners who supervise production " .

The CPI[M]'s resolution of 1976 bears an striking similarity with **Marseille Congress**, differing in only the sentence construction, and which was picked by Engles for severe criticism. How would Engles feel if he was shown the CPI[M]'s : "accordingly, even "exploiting" individuals- rich peasants utilizing agricultural labourers and poor peasants, are not enemies as long as they are productive and willing to extend political support"?

But why should Dalits suffer in education and jobs under public institutions? Electoral arithmetic seems to be in play again. SCs and STs put together constitute 29.11 per cent or less than one third in WB's total population. This makes a good electoral sense to target one third of the electorate, and win sympathy of the two-third. The Left under Jyoti Basu seems to have done exactly that, albeit, with a profound 'theoretical' coating- that, the Left does not believe in Varna/Caste divisions, and therefore, no Varna/Caste based policies. This 'theoretical' ploy worked, and to the pleasure of non-Dalit citizens of WB, the Left Front government did everything to subvert Constitutional provisions for Dalits. Thus, while Congress played only lip-service to Dalits' cause, and enjoyed their support, the Left took a rabid-anti-Dalit stance to get support of rest others. That is another reason as why Dalits witnessed steady decline, and inequality gap furthered widened between Dalits and non-Dalits under Left Front rule in WB.