

# ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## Mr Jyoti Basu: A Gentleman and a Communist

Bibek Debroy<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Mr Jyoti Basu – India’s most prominent and senior communist leader – passed away on 17 January 2010. Mr Basu had the distinction of being the Chief Minister of the Indian state of West Bengal for more than two decades. His death marks the end of an era in Indian and West Bengal politics. This brief traces the critical events during the political career of Mr Basu that spanned for more than six decades and concludes that while Mr Basu was both a gentleman and a communist, he was more of the former than the latter.

There is a pre-1977 Mr Jyoti Basu, another Mr Jyoti Basu from 1977 to 2000, and finally a third Mr Jyoti Basu from 2000 to 2010, though one naturally leads to the other.

Had events unfurled otherwise and there not been a “historic blunder” in 1996, India might have had its first “communist” Prime Minister. After Mr Basu’s death, most commentators have focused on the man who was the state of West Bengal’s Chief Minister for an unbroken spell of 23 years from 1977 to 2000 and the legacy he left behind for West Bengal. Since the year 2005, and more formally since 2008, Mr Basu has not been that important in India’s national politics. Prior to the year 1977, Mr Basu was noted to have been strongly influenced by the thoughts of leading British political theorist Harold Laski, and Rajani Palme Dutt, the noted theoretician from the Communist Party of Great Britain. His views and thoughts were also shaped by the legacies of trade unions and railway workers and the Tebhaga movement (a large-scale peasant agitation organised the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1946). Mr Basu was one of the key leaders instrumental in the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] in the year 1964. He, along with several other noted communist leaders of the time such as P.C. Joshi and H.S. Surjeet, courted considerable controversy by expressing their sympathies for China during the India-China skirmish of 1962.

Mr Basu was sworn in twice as the Deputy Chief Minister of West Bengal as part of the ruling United Front government during the years 1967 and 1969. Following the return of the Congress party to power in the state after the 1972 elections, Mr Basu and the CPI(M) boycotted the assembly for five years (1972 and 1977) accusing the Congress of rigging the

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Bibek Debroy is an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, and a Research Professor at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, India. He can be contacted at [bdebroy@gmail.com](mailto:bdebroy@gmail.com).

elections. These are however, legacies that Mr Basu distanced himself from post-1977. Indeed, most people have probably forgotten that Mr Ajoy Mukherjee, the then-Chief Minister of the United Front government representing Bangla Congress, a regional political party from the state, undertook a public hunger strike in protest against his communist cabinet colleagues (including Mr Basu) and issued a press statement, “This Left Communist and its associate parties should not be given the opportunity of ruling the country even for another day by being in the ministry.”<sup>2</sup>

But that was not quite what happened in 1977. Somewhat against the tide of a priori expectations, the Left Front [a coalition of communist parties led by the CPI(M)] came to power in West Bengal in 1977 with an overwhelming majority and Mr Jyoti Basu became the Chief Minister. In the turbulent Naxalite days of the early 1970s, the Left Front would not have won the elections had rural voters of West Bengal not turned against the Congress, a phenomenon that would drive much of the CPI(M)’s subsequent politics under Mr Basu. The Left’s brief stints in Kerala in 1959<sup>3</sup> and West Bengal in both 1967 and 1969 also made the CPI(M) distrustful about democratic inclinations of both the Congress party and its leader Mrs Indira Gandhi.

These days, most people have forgotten the hard-line ideology of Mr Pramod Das Gupta, the veteran member of the CPI (M) politburo and general secretary of the West Bengal unit of the CPI(M). Mr Dasgupta, an old colleague and contemporary of Mr Basu, had a major say in the functioning of the CPI(M). It was not easy to bring in outside expertise and those who were not mass leaders (such as the state Finance Ministers like Mr Ashok Mitra and Mr Asim Dasgupta). In the pre-1991 pre-economic reform days, most people would have described Mr Basu as a pragmatist and capable administrator. Here was a person who, as Transport Minister in the United Front government, had pushed for nationalisation of Calcutta Tramways Corporation (CTC). Before he opted out of Chief Ministership, in 1995-96, he pushed for privatisation of the Great Eastern Hotel, a prime government property in Kolkata. And there were similar intentions expressed with other state properties, such as Lily Biscuits and WEBEL (West Bengal Electronics Industry Development Corporation).

Operation Barga<sup>4</sup>, panchayats, Centre-State relations, social empowerment, insulation of West Bengal (until recently) from caste and religion-based politics – all these are part of the Basu legacy. The Marxist downgrades role of individuals in history. But in all these various initiatives, much credit accrues to Mr Basu. As a member of the Indian federation, the state of West Bengal does not score well on several economic indicators and it is unnecessary to catalogue that litany of woes. By the same token, much culpability also accrues to Mr Basu. (It is a separate matter that the current Chief Minister of West Bengal Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya found it difficult to fill his shoes.) Agricultural transformation in West Bengal did not extend beyond low-productivity small-holder agriculture. There was no industrialisation. Work ethics were ruined. And flight of financial capital was reinforced by flight of human capital. As one who had obtained the best of education (St Xavier’s School, Presidency College, Middle Temple), Mr Basu ought to have appreciated that the Left’s conscious attempt to control education and “culture” would ruin West Bengal’s strength in

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<sup>2</sup> Maiti, Prasenjit (2002), *Problems of Governance in India since Independence: The Bengal Success Story*, Vedams ebooks Pvt. Ltd. Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> A communist government under the Chief Ministership of Mr E.M.S. Nampoothiripad was sworn in on 16 March 1957 and was dismissed on 31 July 1959.

<sup>4</sup> A land reforms movement introduced in West Bengal after the CPI(M) came to power in 1978 for giving legitimate land titles to sharecroppers.

human resources. West Bengal might have trundled along had it not been for the momentous economic changes ushered in 1991 and the reform-orientation in several States, including the much maligned state of Bihar. It is undoubtedly true that West Bengal, even before Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, found it impossible to handle this. Especially since 2003, it was not only western and northern India that outstripped West Bengal, but so did the south and parts of eastern India.

Taken uncharitably out of context, “Though we did not have any clear idea about what was happening around us, one feature stood out; we did not like it at all.” This is a quote from Jyoti Basu’s memoirs *With the People*. But that is essentially what has happened to the Left Front in West Bengal; the violence witnessed under Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is not something the “bhadralok” Mr Jyoti Basu would have liked. Mr Ashok Mitra – the erstwhile Finance Minister of West Bengal and a reputed economist – once said that he (Ashok Mitra) was a communist and not a gentleman. Jyoti Basu was both and more the gentleman than the communist. A chief minister for five consecutive terms (a record for all chief ministers in independent India), he did not have to witness the expected demise of the CPI(M) in the Legislative Assembly elections scheduled to be held in 2011. But he has seen the writing on the wall, even if he has not presided over it, and he has also witnessed marginalisation of the Left and the demise of the Third Front in national politics. This was a far cry from the days of Harkishan Singh Surjeet and Jyoti Basu and one cannot help feeling that Jyoti Basu would have been a happier man had he passed away in 2008, given that the Parliamentary elections of 2009 witnessed an unprecedented drop in the popular mandate for the Left in West Bengal. But the atheist is unlikely to have prayed to God for that.

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