



# Lal Salaam: The decline of communism in India

**Aarav Gupta**

Student of  
Modern School, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, India  
Independent research

## Abstract

*'Before his execution, Comrade Bhagat Singh was reading Lenin...he marked his place in the book by folding the top of the page...we (Indian Marxists) need to turn the page open and start where he left off'*

*a common saying in Indian Marxist Leninist circles*

In the 2019 general elections, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) secured only 3 out of 542 seats, a mere 0.55%. As we approach the 2024 General elections, a political force that once held the potential to swing election outcomes in favour of an alliance has dwindled into political irrelevance. This decline coincides with the rise of right-wing nationalist parties, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has single-handedly led to an erosion of other political parties. However, the fall of the left is unparalleled.

This paper will offer an overview of Indian communism within the context of the freedom struggle. It will delve into the establishment of the Communist Party of India (CPI), internal divisions within the Indian communist movement, and the emergence of the Naxals, a militant and radical faction within Indian Marxism. The paper will conclude with a case study of West Bengal, an Indian state where the left held political power for a remarkable three decades.

## Golden Era of Indian Marxism

Pre-Independence India is often regarded as the zenith of Indian Marxism, with the backdrop of the Indian working class's oppression framed by the Russian Revolution.

In the early 20th century, Lenin and his allies made a resolute commitment to not passively observe historical events. During a pivotal meeting, Lenin advocated that communist parties in colonial territories align themselves with national liberation movements and bourgeois democratic parties. Notably, present at this gathering was the father of Indian communism, M.N. Roy.

M.N. Roy earned widespread support through his active participation in the protests against the announcement of the Partition of Bengal in 1905. He firmly believed that liberation from British rule necessitated violent means. During World War I, Roy sought material assistance from Germany to combat their mutual adversary but was unsuccessful. Subsequently, he endeavoured to secure support from Japanese and Chinese nationalists. After facing multiple arrests in foreign countries, Roy eventually travelled to the United States, where he developed a profound affinity towards communism. Apprehensive of potential arrest, he fled to Mexico, where he engaged with local politicians and established the Communist Party of Mexico, marking its distinction as the first Communist Party outside Russia. Roy remained a member of the Communist International until 1927 when he was expelled for expressing support for Trotsky's ideas.

M.N. Roy and his wife played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Communist Party of India in 1925. The formation of this new party resulted in the dissolution of smaller communist groups and unions. However, as time passed, Roy found himself marginalised by his fellow comrades, who labelled him a revisionist. This is one of the earliest examples of Indian Marxists using the term 'revisionist' to brand politically differing communists. Eventually, Roy distanced himself from his communist identity, disillusioned by the movement's singular fixation on class warfare. He introduced an alternative philosophical approach known as 'Radical Humanism.'

## The Litmus Test

In 1952, the Communist Party of India emerged as the first major opposition party in independent India, securing 16 out of 401 seats. Then, in 1957, the Communist Party of India achieved a historic electoral victory, forming the world's first democratically elected communist government in the state of Kerala. Kerala remains the sole communist stronghold in India to this day.

A crucial test for the Communist Party of India came during the Indo-China War, where they faced a dilemma between their loyalty to the Comintern and supporting their own country. Declassified documents<sup>1</sup> from 1959 reveal disputes between Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong regarding India's fate. While Khrushchev recognised India as a bourgeois democracy, he saw the current political setup as the best option for the Indian people. During this time, divisions within the CPI became apparent, with some members advocating for a Chinese invasion of India to eliminate the "bourgeois democracy," while others supported India's alignment with the Soviet Union. The Indian National Congress exploited this situation to question the loyalty of communists. CPI members who did not support the war effort during the 1962 Indo-China War were labelled as anti-nationals.

## The Great Split

On January 13, 1962, Ajoy Ghosh, the party chief, passed away from a heart attack. Ghosh had led the CPI through tumultuous times, and his death naturally resulted in a power vacuum within the party. Additionally, on March 7, 1964, an English newspaper made an allegation that in 1924, Shripad Amrut Dange, the Chief of Communist Party of India after Ajoy Ghosh, had written letters to the Viceroy of India, requesting a reduction of his prison sentence in exchange for an arrangement that would have involved Dange becoming an informant for the government.

The CPI's feeble response, which merely asserted that the newspaper had maliciously fabricated evidence, proved unconvincing to both the general electorate and party members who already had reservations about the "revisionist leaders." In response, many leaders of the Communist Party of India departed and formed the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), driven by a demand for a more radical left. The split in the CPI is often attributed to several factors, including the Indo-China War, border conflicts between the Soviet Union and China, the invasion of Tibet and the annexation of its people, the revelation of Dange's letters, and the passing of party chief Ajoy Ghosh.

On multiple occasions, CPI-M leaders asserted themselves as the "true communist party." An immediately notable distinction between the CPI and CPI-M was the presence of Mao Zedong's portrait in CPI-M offices. Between 1964 and 1966, CPI-M party members in Bengal and Kerala were arrested and detained without trials. The CPI-M, which criticized the CPI's pro-Congress stance and emphasis on parliamentary victories, made the decision to contest elections in Bengal alongside all non-reactionary opposition parties. This move faced criticism from radical communists and communist parties in foreign countries, including China and New Zealand. Almost immediately, CPI-M started to outshine the CPI in both electoral politics and influence. It eventually became the country's most prominent communist party, even in traditional left strongholds such as Tripura, Bengal, and Kerala.

## Naxalbari

Radical communists and impartial political commentators of that era observed that the differences between the CPI and CPI-M had largely reduced to symbolic gestures, as the CPI-M appeared to replicate the CPI's preoccupation with parliamentary victories.

<sup>1</sup> <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/discussion-between-ns-khrushchev-and-mao-zedong>

In 1967, a peasant uprising ignited in Naxalbari, a northern village in West Bengal. Just months before the uprising, the CPI-M had played a significant role in the coalition that governed West Bengal. Local CPI-M leaders Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal led this uprising with the aim of redistributing land to landless peasants. It was evident that the intention was to mobilise peasants and imitate Mao's China, as earlier attempts at launching a class struggle based on workers had failed. Radical supporters, cadres, and leaders within the CPI-M saw Naxalbari as the catalyst for a class struggle in India.

The CPI-M found itself deeply divided: on one hand, it was a part of the alliance governing West Bengal, and on the other, its own party workers and leaders were at the forefront of and supported an uprising against the West Bengal government. Additionally, the Communist Party of China (CPC) formally expressed its support for the Naxalbari movement, leading to a rupture in the relationship between the CPC and CPI-M.

Over the following years, West Bengal experienced extreme turbulence. The CPI-M initially formed a majority government but later lost to the CPI-Congress alliance, and President's rule was imposed on multiple occasions. Within the CPI-M, another division emerged: radical militant communists who endorsed the Naxalbari movement and advocated armed acts of violence against the bourgeoisie formed the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML). A primary accusation leveled by the CPI-ML against the CPI-M was that of Marxist revisionism.

CPI-ML faced a fate similar to that of the CPI and CPI-M, splintering into numerous factions, the only major difference being different leaders of each of these parties. Many of these splinter groups embraced militancy, although some later ventured into parliamentary politics.

Today, the most prominent Naxal organization that continues to operate as a militant entity is the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Formed by merging various smaller splinter groups in 2004, this party has been banned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act.

## West Bengal: A bastion of Political Violence

Discussing politics in West Bengal necessitates an exploration of its deep-rooted history of political violence, with the left playing a pivotal role in fostering this trend.

Major incidents of violence in West Bengal began to surface after the Naxalbari uprising of 1967. A society that was previously divided along religious lines now found itself fragmented along class lines, with each political party catering to different social strata. The Indian National Congress represented the upper-caste upper-class landlords, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) became the party of the middle class small peasants, and the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML) evolved into the party of landless Dalit labourers.

Initially, political violence started between Naxal student activists and law enforcement agencies but gradually permeated both rural and urban life. The first instances of the use of muscle power in parliamentary politics were not by the left but by the Indian National Congress which led to its victory in the 1972 state elections. The Congress's open use of violence pushed voters towards the left, culminating in its historic victory in the 1977 state elections. The left leveraged the reform of Panchayati Raj Institutions and land reforms to gain widespread support. The restructuring of Panchayati Raj Institutions heightened the significance of winning local elections, a feat that CPI-M achieved in a manner similar to the Congress: by quashing all dissent.

Indian society is predominantly divided based on social differences, including caste and religion. The left, however, exacerbated this division in Bengal by subsuming all other forms of identity under one's political affiliation. Every individual's identity became synonymous with the political party they supported.

Landowners and religious institutions in rural Indian society often assume social responsibilities by resolving individuals' personal issues. The left systematically eliminated landowners and religion from Bengal's social fabric, leaving local party workers with the responsibility of addressing people's personal problems. There were documented instances of blood relatives setting fire to each other's houses due to differing political allegiances.

Today, the political party that held power in Bengal for 30 years (1977-2006) is not even the state's primary opposition party.

## The Fall

*"If at age 20 you are not a Communist then you have no heart. If at age 30 you are not a Capitalist then you have no brains."*

*-George Bernard Shaw*

The decline of the left in Indian politics can be attributed to multiple factors, including an ageing leadership with an average age exceeding 70 years and an inability to adapt to the right-wing, hyper-nationalist shift in politics. However, a historical analysis reveals that the left's fall was inevitable.

The disillusionment of the Father of Indian Communism, M.N. Roy, with communism's fixation on class warfare demonstrated that its replication in the Indian context was unfeasible. Over time, Indian Marxists developed a habit of branding other Marxists with differing opinions as "revisionist." This obsession indeed created divisions within leftist circles, to the extent that some humorously suggest that there may be more communist parties than communist politicians in India today.

In India, religion holds a central place in social life, and the left's rejection of religion and its understanding of secularism in a Western context was a major shortcoming. The rise of Hindu right-wing nationalism can be attributed to the left and centre's failure to grasp Indian society, which predominantly revolves around faith. An anti-theist, ultra-rationalist view of religion is incompatible with a society where faith is synonymous with daily life.

While a Hindu right-winger might differ from a Muslim right-winger, the left's strength lies in the ability of individuals to shed their social identity as a communist. In most cases, a Muslim leftist would not perceive a Hindu leftist differently. However, this strength of the Marxists also became their weakness, as the most common taunt in the Indian parliament is that Indian communist parties are funded by China and Russia.

The relations of communists with Russia were generally viewed positively until India's market liberalisation and globalisation. However, their affinity with China, a country with which India has had border disputes, allowed other political parties to question the loyalty of the communists. Even today, in an era of anti-China sentiments, the general secretary of India's largest communist party, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Sitaram Yechury is known to have ideological allies in China.

Lastly, the biggest challenge facing the communists today is their perceived doublespeak. On one hand, they are a bourgeois democratic party that has supported industrialists and capitalists multiple times. On the other hand, they struggle to shed communist symbols. The left fails to realise that Indian voters, in a country marked by severe economic disparities, do not necessarily have an issue with communist principles. Instead, they take issue with communist symbolism, which has been systematically demonised by conservatives and progressives alike.

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