

Rusting hammer and sickle

Pankaj Vohra

THE CPI(M) appears to be on the receiving end for a change. The behaviour of the Left party, which has been in power in West Bengal for 30 uninterrupted years, in Parliament, followed by the violence in Nandigram, must have left its leaders red-faced, even while providing its opponents an opportunity to find a foothold in the state.

power struggle in the party, both at the Centre and in the state, and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Prakash Karat's leadership are being challenged.

This is the first time that there has been a popular upsurge against the West Bengal government, one that has isolated the CPI(M) even from some of its allies. The allies may

blame on Naxal elements, who, they claim, instigated the common people. The party is not willing to accept the fact that its cadres could be behind the shocking incidents designed to suppress the voice of the people. This has led to historians Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar to distance themselves from the West Bengal government by returning the prestigious Rabindra Puraskar conferred on them.

That the malaise within the party is acute is also evident from the fact that party patriarch Jyoti Basu has had to intervene and has questioned the decision-making process of the state government and the party. He has warned the party leadership that if decision-making is confined to only two or three people, it could have a disastrous effect on the overall health of the government and the party. Basu's intervention also points to the power struggle within the party, and in their defence, Bhattacharjee and Karat will now need the maximum support of the politburo, which is bound to be divided on the subject.

The problem with the CPI(M) is that while surviving in a democratic structure, it has increasingly been behaving more and more undemocratically. Questions have often been raised about the absence of inner-party democracy, and occasions like these highlight just how undemocratic the decision-making process actually is. The party also suffers because of the absence of a critical review of its own performance and anyone offering critical appraisal is sought to be rebuffed and countered with orchestrated ruthlessness. The

developments in Nandigram clearly indicate the authoritarian streak in the party's top leadership, which, for historic reasons, is unable to cope with any kind of resistance to its proposals.

In fact, being in power for 30 years has blinded the party, whose cadres have started believing that winning elections will remain an easy task if the efforts are well-organised and if the voters are poor and heavily-dependent on the government for their sustenance. The party's finger is not on the pulse of the people, and Nandigram and Singur have

(Congress) by the Left. The party also needs to reach out to the people and provide relief wherever necessary by freeing the state from the stranglehold of the CPI(M). It is always healthy to have an alternative to any party, whether at the Centre or in the states. That way, no one can take the people for granted.

The BJP, which has a negligible presence in West Bengal, is also eager to exploit the situation. Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani has decided to give the issue national prominence. The Congress could also do something similar. The CPI(M)'s

Nandigram firing: WB government orders CID probe

KOLKATA

A day after ordering an executive inquiry into the police firing in Nandigram that left 14 people dead, the West Bengal government today asked the CID to probe the incident.

Home Secretary P R Roy told reporters that a CID team had rushed to Nandigram after it was asked to investigate the incident immediately.

Roy said the CID probe will be concurrent to the CBI inquiry being done at the directive of the Calcutta High Court.

To a question, he said the executive inquiry, to be headed by Burdwan division's Commissioner Balbir Ram, would only go into the justification of the police firing and would submit its report to the government within 45 days. Roy said he had received a police report on the Nandigram incident during the day which said police had to open fire after being attacked on March 14.

He said police had collected some photographs and video CDs of the incident that will be submitted to the inquiry panel.

What happened in Nandigram and thereafter points to certain things that could become a cause of great worry for the CPI(M) leadership if remedial steps are not taken immediately. The CPI(M) has come out as a divided house, and even a large number of its ardent supporters do not seem to be in agreement with the manner in which the party has handled the situation. The developments indicate a fierce

come around after persuasion and because of the compulsions of politics, but are clearly dissatisfied at present. In Nandigram, criminal elements as well as the state machinery seemed to have forcibly attempted to suppress legitimate protest with the use of unprecedented force.

The tragedy is that some of the party bosses fail to see the reality and are trying to shift the



indicated this all too well.

Mamata Banerjee, who is leading the anti-Left agitation in the state, has got huge support from all sections. She is an unpredictable politician, but there is no doubt that she has become the rallying point for anti-Left forces.

The Congress, which depends heavily on the CPI(M) at the Centre and is pitted against it in West Bengal, has not come up with a clear-cut strategy. This is an opportunity to show that the CPI(M) is anti-people, a charge often levelled at it

true colours should be exposed in order to cut short its bargaining power at the Centre. As for the CPI(M), it needs to look inwards and needs to become more democratic in its functioning. It needs to realise that its cadres are terrorising the people. It must give up its authoritarian streak. It should also realise that its leadership has to be rooted to the ground. The CPI(M) has to shed its hypocrisy in order to survive and must learn lessons from Nandigram. Otherwise, it will be the beginning of the end for the party in West Bengal, as well as in the country. Between us.

Condom drive targets Indian women

LR Jagadheesan, BBC News, Madras

Female sex workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu are to get 60,000 condoms as part of a government sponsored Aids prevention initiative.

The programme is a collaboration between a local Aids control authority and a national family planning trust. At least seven other Indian states have also been lined up to be part of this four month long campaign.

The programme is likely to reach out to over 11,000 women among the vulnerable population across the country. The condoms will be both male and female versions.

Tamil Nadu Health Secretary VK



Aids has grown to be a major issue among Indian sex workers

Kuppuraj described the program as a "major advance in the effort to reduce women's vulnerability to HIV/Aids in Tamil Nadu".

The initiative was launched as a partnership between Tamil Nadu State Aids Control Society (Tansacs) and Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust (HLFPPT).



The prohibitive price of female condoms has complicated matters

Tansacs Project Director Supriya Sahu said that condoms for females have for the first time provided them with a personal choice over their reproductive rights.

The female condom was put on sale earlier in the state by a few companies, but it was not a success.

The protection is a polyurethane sheath or pouch that lines the vagina and helps to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and Aids.

'Tremendous boon'

High pricing was cited as the main barrier for condoms for women. Some of them go for as much as 100 Rupees (\$2) or more.

Similar products for males are available for as little as one Rupee (two cents) per piece.

To overcome this problem, the TANSACS had procured 60,000 condoms for women at the cost of 180,000 Rupees (\$4,000). "Though the actual price is 50 Rupees (\$1) per piece, we have obtained it at a price of three Rupees (seven cents) per piece," Ms Sahu explained.

The HLPPT's National Programme Manager, Kavitha Potturi, said that the female condom programme was an

effort to provide women with greater control over their reproductive health.

Dr Lakshmi Bai, the head of a local community group working among 50,000 sex workers in the state, said female condoms are the most effective protective weapon for commercial workers who face vulnerable situations on a daily basis.

"If we succeed in introducing the female condom among women in sex work, it will be a tremendous boon for them," she said.

"Today they are faced with daily challenges of violence and the consequent inability to negotiate safe sex with men, who quite often refuse to wear a condom.

"In such situations, women's condoms will be the best possible preventive tools for the commercial sex workers," she said.