

An Undefined Attempt: Comments on “The Defining Moments of Left Politics in West Bengal: The Food Movement of 1959 and 1966” by Shivaji Pratim Basu

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1. I begin with congratulating Shivaji for his painstaking research, which involved, tremendous time and energy to gather the data concerning the food movements in West Bengal. I am sure Shivaji is going to invest more.
2. The author has very aptly titled his paper: The defining moment of left politics in West Bengal. It is defining in both senses – the rise and fall of left politics in West Bengal.
3. Indeed, the paper has described in minute details the connections between food movement and the rise of left politics in West Bengal. Also, it has indicated in its pre-conclusion part – conclusions are yet to be drawn, I assume – the connection of food movement and the fall of left politics in the state, but has not yet elaborated analytically on that aspect.
4. However, I am afraid, I have some serious disagreements with the author, about the analysis of the connections:
  - a. The author, following Deluze/Guattari’s theorization of rhizomatic and Tilly’s protest based contentious politics, has seen the food movements of 1959 and 1966 as a kind of social movement, which was as if all pervading – at least involved large sections of the society. But, the reality, I doubt, was different: despite the prevalence of widespread hunger across the state, the 1959 Food Movement did not have a universal spread and momentum: it remained confined to areas of influence of the Communist Party and its allies. One can take a look at the map of food movement – it did not spread beyond 100 kilometres radius of Calcutta. The 1966 movement was also not very different from the 1959, excepting that it was somewhat larger in size. And, the spontaneity of the movement claimed in the paper was perhaps more imagined than real. The organizing role of the communist party was central to the movements – indeed Shivaji has enough data on this (such as the role of Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee - PIFRC). Also, it was the time when Communist Party influenced middle-class organizations, such as of the teachers, students, hospital employees, and so on

were on high tide. I think, there is a disconnect here in Shivaji's analysis: the making of the communist movement in West Bengal, which drew heavily on the food movement that played a crucial role in shaping the communist leadership, which in the later decades turned the communist movement into a sort of hegemony of the educated middle class coming from the upper echelon of the society – the varna Hindus. And this leadership which in the 1960s prescribed some claims made in the new millennium those very prescriptions forbidden.

- b. The disconnect in analysis is also reflected in the paper's not making any attempt to relate the food movement with the previous peasant movements. Although it sees the food movement "as continuum, a legacy that started in the post 1943 famine left movements and passed through the Tebhaga movements during the last years of the Raj", it has not made any attempt to find the connections - and disconnects – between the two. Indeed, he claimed earlier in the paper that the [social movements] "in 1950s were mainly city/town based...later from mid 1960s, the scope of these movements began to widen – the districts/countryside also joined in and sometimes the epicenters shifted from the city/town to districts and villages." Was it really so? What about Tebhaga? One wonders why instead of Tebhaga, the food movement became the defining moment? This relates to my earlier point – the making of the communist leadership. The food movement directly hit the urban middle class and the movement found its root mainly in them, from where the party drew not only its future support but there established a convergence between the party and the urban middle class – that at a later stage the party and the society became inseparable was a result of the middle class hegemony of the party. This middleclass had almost no rural root, and thus, had no stake over land: so, it was easy for this class to support the land reform program; but, it has never made any attempt to build up the basic capabilities of the lower class (precisely the dalits, Adivasis and Muslims) and thus prevented the threat of alternative leadership to be emerged from below.
- c. The ration riot that Shivaji has mentioned in the pre-conclusion section of the paper had certain role in the decline of the left; but, this role was limited to only certain areas – mainly in Birbhum, Bankura, Kochbihar and Bardhaman, and again, it was mainly organized – mostly by Forward Block, a constituent of the

Left Front. That the 2008 agitations were confined to ration riot and did not transform into a movement was due mainly to the fact that the urban middle class was not hungry anymore – either biologically or intellectually. It had already found alternative routes to maintain hegemony. The very middle class that was the mind of the left deserted the left; and the support base on which the left established its hegemony found an opportunity to defy that hegemony (though without much success as the hegemony found immediate clientele. To illustrate, in Birbhum, the district where peoples’ anger against the ration riot took a violent turn, the nexus between the political leaders and ration dealers is still more or less intact – as was indicated by a recent micro level survey by Jean Dreze and his team). Nevertheless, through ration riot food movement in West Bengal completed a circle. But, the decline of the left in West Bengal was rooted in its very emergence – in the pattern and structure of the food movement, which cannot be explained with either botany or the European social analysis.

- d. These need complex analysis, and here one has to take note of the intertwining of social stratification and class division : I think Shivaji does not lack the data – he has already gathered a lot, and can invest some more energy to make the paper into an intellectually disturbing one.
- e. There are some other weaknesses: for example, Caution has not been taken in making statements: one example: Shivaji has used the term Maoists “who believed in immediate peasant revolution on Maoist line”. But during the period he describes those “who believed in immediate peasant revolution” did not call them Maoists as they declared Marxism, Leninism and mao-Tse-Tung’s thought as their guiding philosophy. The term Maoism came into being in a much later phase – in the 1980s, with the formation of the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), and was much popularized by the CPI(Maoist) – an outfit resulted from the merger of the MCC and CPI(M-L) Peoples War Group. One must be careful about the factual matters as such loose application of terms are misleading.
- f. Finally, the absence of analytical grounding amidst rigorous descriptive details seems to have its root in the paper’s very design, which appears to have lacked the basic of intellectual exercise: clarity on the purpose of the exercise. What answer does the paper seek to? How do the historical narratives relate with the present?

How does the author attempt to contextualize the movement with that of the larger societal plane? And, most importantly what disturbed the author to take up the exercise? What is needed most in the paper perhaps is to define the purpose: the absence of clearly defined objective, I suspect, can easily be confused with something like a hastily prepared assignment to prove the universal applicability of Deleuze and Guattari and Tilly.