

PARTY TRICKS

Meet the former Left workers who are shaping BJP's growth in West Bengal

The saffron party has been wooing over grassroots workers of the CPM with carrots and sometimes with sticks.

Swati Sengupta

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Dibyangshu Sarkar/AFP

There is a tectonic shift under way in Bengal politics. The Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has been out of power since 2011 and is perishing fast. Its successor, the Trinamool Congress, is struggling to hold on to power in the face of the Saradha scam taint. This turmoil has created a vacuum in the state, into which the Bharatiya Janata Party has slowly rushed in.

For the saffron outfit, this is no average campaign to clinch another state. A non-entity in Bengal until the 2014 general election, the BJP staggered all by winning two Lok Sabha seats and, more significantly, by clocking its all-time best vote share of about 17%. In September last year, it built upon this triumph by seizing an Assembly seat in the by-elections. But to grow further from here, the BJP knows that it needs to build a much more extensive organisational structure in the state.

So, to save time, it is doing the next best thing: hijacking CPM's existing structure.

The BJP has lately been on a massive campaign winning over CPM workers to its side – whether with carrots or sticks. Hundreds of CPM local leaders have reportedly been wooed over with inducements. Many others have shifted allegiance because they came under from attacks – allegedly from BJP workers – and the CPM leadership proved ineffectual at protecting them.

According to BJP's widely-flogged figures, its membership has crossed 14 lakh in West Bengal in the recent months. Compare this with the core membership of the CPM (around 3 lakh) and the combined membership of other Left parties (another 2 lakh). The Left parties, of course, draw their support from mass organisations like unions of farmers, women, students and workers, but there is no accurate way of projecting a reduction in those reserves of support since the parties do not admit to any.

Nevertheless, in these times of shifting loyalties, it is not unusual to find former supporters or members of the Left working with great vim and vigour to bring victory to the BJP in the upcoming municipal elections in Kolkata and the state Assembly elections in 2016.

Among these are industrialist Sisir Bajoria, who was a state committee member of the CPM in Rajasthan, and Barry O'Brien, a nominated member of the state Assembly during the Left regime. Among these too are hundreds of lesser-known names. Who are these people?

Gouranga Pal

Pal was an active grassroots worker of the CPM in the Basirhat South constituency for 13 years, working closely with the party's former MLA Narayan Mukherjee, who died last year. He was also a local committee member of the party's youth wing (Democratic Youth Federation of India) and a zonal committee member of its students' wing (Students' Federation of India).

Over the past few years Pal felt that his party had "lost people's acceptability". "There were internal squabbles," Pal said. "Some leaders enjoyed holding on to their post, not letting others work."

In July last year Pal was contacted by "some leaders from the BJP who wanted me to join them" and he made the leap. The saffron outfit made him party secretary in ward six of Basirhat municipality and, a few months later, he helped it win the Basirhat South seat in the by-elections.

The Basirhat South constituency falls in the North 24 Parganas district, close to Bangladesh. "It has always had a high minority population, but there was no Hindu-Muslims divide all along," Pal said. "It was only after the Trinamool Congress came to power that its party leaders began to play the minority card to woo Muslims and stoked a culture of hatred." Pal, a "known face" in the area, has been on an induction drive for the BJP and says that "many Muslims are joining the BJP".

Tushar Mukherjee

A resident of Tollygunge in Kolkata, Mukherjee was a member of the CPM for over 20 years, all the while working on civic issues for the party in his ward. "I believed in Left's ideology and joined the

party to work for the people,” said Mukherjee. “But I found it difficult to work. I watched in dismay as leaders got involved in ego clashes and did not allow others to work.”

Inspired by Narendra Modi, Mukherjee joined the BJP in June 2014 and was made party secretary in ward 97. “For the past few months, we have been organising membership camps in our area,” said Mukherjee. “I have also been helping slum dwellers open bank accounts under the Jan Dhan Yojana.”

Mukherjee says the Trinamool Congress was never an option for him. “Look at how it looted the poor through the Saradha scheme. The Left tried to bring in industry, but in the hands of the Trinamool Congress the future of industry in Bengal is doomed.”

Dr Bithika Mandal

Mandal has been actively involved in Left politics since 1984. She was a district committee member and state secretariat member of the women’s wing of the All India Forward Bloc (one of the Left Front’s constituents) besides being its MLA from Barasat, a constituency in the north of Kolkata.

The 49-year-old was among the many Forward Bloc leaders who joined the BJP last year. She says she got disillusioned with the Forward Bloc when the party sent her a show-cause notice after her visit to the family members of a teenager raped and killed in Kamduni. Mandal alleges that its leaders tried to stop her from whatever work she wanted to do. “Forget about speed, there was no urge to even work.”

In June 2014, she finally switched to the BJP. “I wasn’t familiar with BJP’s ideologies at all, it was always Left politics for me,” she said. “But when I came to know about the BJP, I was drawn to its ideology. I don’t know what makes some people call the BJP communal. The Forward Bloc fields Muslim candidates because they are necessary to fight the Trinamool Congress’s Muslim candidates. What can be worse than this subtle communal politics and doublespeak?”