

COMMUNISM IN INDIA



Events, Processes & Ideologies

BIDYUT CHAKRABARTY

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My mentors, for being so generous



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Preface



THIS BOOK WAS finally completed during the summer break in 2013, though I had been nurturing the idea of writing a full-length monograph on communism in India since my college days at Calcutta Presidency College, which, as an elite institution for higher education, has been a germinating ground for creative politics since its foundation in the early nineteenth century. My idea took concrete shape in a breakfast meeting with Oxford University Press (New York) editor Angela Chnapko in San Diego in late September of 2011 when we met to finalize a book on political thought. Once the meeting was over, I knew that I had a project in hand. After my return to Virginia where I was teaching at the time, I received an email from Angela asking me to write an extended proposal on the topic, which I readily agreed to do given my interest in the project. While preparing the book proposal, I found it very difficult to combine the two forms of communism in India, which are diametrically opposite but share identical ideological legacies. After pondering over it for a week, the problem was sorted out, and the proposal was dashed to Angela to proceed further. The OUP decision to go ahead with the publication of the book was forwarded to me on 4 July 2012 when I was in New York to witness the celebration of US Independence Day along with my family. The book contract was signed on 9 July again in a luncheon meeting with Angela in a restaurant very close to the headquarters of Oxford University Press in New York City. I am thankful to Angela because without her constant persuasion and personal interest in the project, it would not have been possible for me to embark on such an ambitious work. I am grateful to her for being so supportive during the preparation of the manuscript.

I owe a great deal to the participants who listened when I presented some of the draft chapters in seminars/workshops in various campuses in different countries. The project would not have been complete had the activists who are associated with radical politics and the government officials who are responsible for policy framing seeking to halt the progress of the Red Corridor not been generous in sharing their experiences and thoughts. Surender and Sampat deserve special thanks for having given me a chance to witness the socio-political churning in the remote villages in Uttar Pradesh. This experience was an eye-opener for me because it brought me face to face with what is being euphemistically identified as a “silent revolution” at the grassroots. I am particularly thankful to Dr Bob Kolodinsky of James Madison University for having procured articles and other texts for me whenever I asked. The support extended by Saurav Tripathy of Tripura cadre IPS and his office colleague, Sudeep Sen, was very useful in understanding the complex nature of the parliamentary left in Tripura in light of the constant friction between the Bengali (who are mainly migrants) leadership of the parliamentary left and those propped up by the indigenous population. I am also happy to pay a tribute to my mentor at the London School of Economics, Professor Tom Nossiter, in the form of a chapter on Kerala, which Tom always considered as his second home. I wish that he was around to assess whether I possess the intellectual capability of conceptualizing the growing salience of the parliamentary left in Kerala despite being ideologically deviant in the classical Marxist–Leninist sense. By analytically dissecting India’s parliamentary left, my book seeks to respond to a question that Tom had raised in his *Marxist Government in India* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988) on whether there is an “Indian form of communism.” It is difficult to provide a conclusive answer to this question though I endeavor in this book to trace out some of the distinctive features of Indian variety of communism that are, despite being “revisionist” in the authentic Marxist–Leninist sense, mostly context driven, whether one talks of the parliamentary left or its *bête noire*, the Maoists.

In this neo-liberal world of obsession for cash and material goods, academic works are not always appreciated because the financial reward is hardly proportionate to the labor that an author usually applies. There are families that tend to publicly appreciate an academic author since it is politically correct; however, for most, time spent writing academic texts can feel like wasted time. Colleagues and friends are encouraging, though most do not appear very enthusiastic when academic books written by their friends hit the stands. So, an academic is “a very lonely person” and is generally pushed to an unfriendly environment when he or she undertakes an academic work. Nonetheless, this is hardly a deterrent, and authors keep on pursuing their profession despite these circumstances. I did encounter these familiar hurdles, though the task was made easier by the cooperation of my friends and mentors who always stood by me. I am grateful to them for having sustained my zeal to engage in fruitful intellectual challenges in circumstances that are not favorably tilted toward academic creativity. I would not have attempted such an exercise had I not been encouraged by my students in various parts of the world where I have taught. If they find the text provocative and intellectually stimu-

lating, I will have achieved what I am looking for. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Rajat Kujur of Sambalpur University, Orissa (India) who has co-authored part II of this book with me. Without his filed inputs, it would not have been possible to comprehend the complex dynamics of Maoism, which is also a response to the over-zealous endorsement by the Indian state of the neo-liberal economic design for rapid industrial growth at the cost of multitudes. *Communism in India* draws on my earlier works on Indian politics in general and communism in particular. Some of the arguments that I have made here were initiated in books and articles that I have published so far. I am thankful to my friends, colleagues, and publishers who always remain helpful. Last, not the least, my heartfelt gratitude to my mentors in academia who always remain the main pillars behind my every successful endeavor.

Bidyut Chakrabarty

University of Delhi, India

June 2013



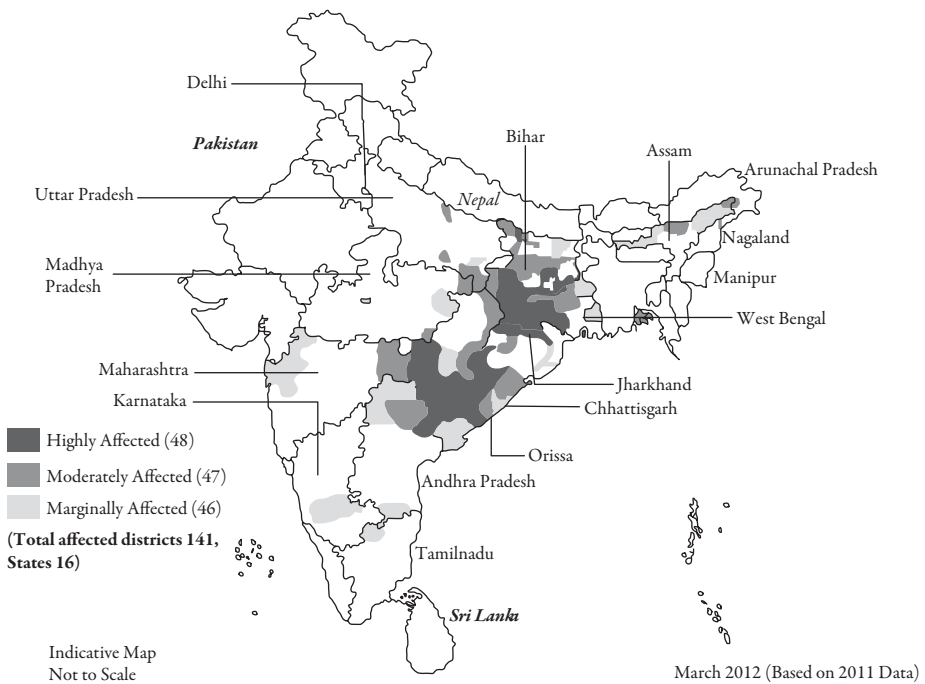
List of Abbreviations

AICCCR	All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries
AITMC	All India Trinamul Congress
AOBSZC	Andhra–Orissa Border Special Zonal Committee
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CCOMPOSA	Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties of South Asia
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI (Maoist)	Communist Party of India (Maoist)
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist)
CPN (Maoist)	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
CRZ	Compact Revolutionary Zone
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
FDI	foreign direct investment
KMPP	Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party
KSP	Kerala Socialist Party
KTP	Karshaka Thozhilali Party
LDF	Left Democratic Front
MCC	Maoist Communist Centre
MCC–I	Maoist Communist Centre–India
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NSS	Nair Service Society
PDF	People’s Democratic Front
PLGA	People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army
PPC	People’s Plan Campaign
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
PW	People’s War
PWG	People’s War Group

RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SNDP	Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam
SSP	Samyukta Socialist Party
TTAADC	Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council
UDF	United Democratic Front
UF	United Front
UPA	United Progressive Alliance

COMMUNISM IN INDIA

LEFT-WING EXTREMIST AFFECTED AREAS IN INDIA



Introduction



SET IN MOTION in the 1920s with the formation of the Communist Party of India, the communist movement has manifested differently in different phases of India's recent political history. *Communism in India* is a contextual study of this phenomenon, which was articulated in two diametrically opposite ways. The parliamentary left, by subscribing to social democracy, used the prevalent democratic institutions of governance to create conditions for the fulfillment of the Marxist–Leninist goal of establishing a classless society. Conversely, ultra-left-wing extremism views radical social change in the sense of dramatically altering existing class relations as simply inconceivable under parliamentary democracy, which its followers consider as an elite-driven device for justifying the age-old system of class exploitation but with a different label. Once the system of governance is appropriated by those with vested socio-economic interests, as frequently occurs, democratic institutions, despite being sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged, always reflect class prejudices when attempting to change the prevalent class relations. There are innumerable instances of landed gentry becoming involved in left movements and later in the government “not due to any ideological commitment to the poor, but to re-establish their dominance in the region.”¹ Given the diverse nature of communism and its social base, it is useful to focus on the social, economic, and political metamorphosis of a country with a long colonial past that is evident not only in the institutions of power but also in the ideological underpinnings that support liberal democracy of the Westminster type. Even in the changed political environment following the transfer of power in 1947, governance in India was articulated largely in liberal democratic terms whereby dissenting voices were accommodated as long as they did not disrupt the prevalent social, economic, and political

order. Also at this time the state's response to dissent became more calibrated than ever, presumably because protest movements, when articulated in a liberal-democratic format, were always considered to be refreshing socio-economic and political inputs from the grassroots, which were also useful in reinventing strategies for effective governance for long-term gain.

By attempting a contextual explanation of the growth of several constituencies of power outside the arena of the state, this introduction draws on the wider social, economic, and political milieu to grasp its importance in shaping and defending a movement that challenges the conventional conceptualization of transformation of grassroots socio-political discontent into effective ideological onslaughts. This is largely an outcome of the deepening of democracy over the years during which "the bulk of . . . the population acquires binding by being involved in struggles against efforts at denying their rightful claims over resources."² With their sustained participation in the ongoing democratic struggle, people remain integral to the processes of governance. Furthermore, when India integrated into global capital following the acceptance of neoliberal economic reforms in 1991, the scene became far more complicated. New players have arrived in the economic arena who have no emotional obligation to the indigenous population. In collaboration with the state, which supports the private operators and their local representatives for specific political gains, these investors have been unobstructed in their partisan goal of making profit at any cost. The one exception to this has perhaps been the organized mass confrontations, including those at the behest of the Maoists in India's tribal land. The mass protests against the well-planned efforts by global capital seeking to radically alter the prevalent socio-economic and political texture of the polity are also symptomatic of "the processes of the deepening of democracy" in areas that traditionally remained outside the arena of the organized world of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics. Thus it is not strange to find that the issues of gender, ethnicity, or region have become critical constituencies of concern in contemporary politics. Democracy as a culture has brought about revolutionary changes not only in the social constituencies of protest movements but also in our conceptualization that has set in motion fresh debates involving new political actors seeking to articulate their roles differently by imbibing the spirit of the era.

What is striking in contemporary India is the salience of both the contrasting varieties of Marxism–Leninism. On the one hand, those pursuing the constitutional path of parliamentary democracy claim to be Marxist–Leninist notwithstanding the severe Marxist critique of parliament being "a pig sty." On the other hand, those upholding violence as the only means for revolution consider themselves to be true followers of Marxism–Leninism. The latter group sees Marxism–Leninism as having completely lost its revolutionary potential at the hands of the parliamentary left in India. Nonetheless, there is no denying that both versions of Marxism–Leninism seem to have consolidated effective ideological platforms for mobilizing the socio-economically marginalized sections of society. While the parliamentary left remains a strong contender for power in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura, the Maoists have also succeeded in mobilizing the indigenous

population in several parts of the country. Not only have the parliamentary communists moved away from a revolutionary to a reformist Bernsteinian social democratic orientation, they have also fulfilled their ideological commitment to the preservation of democratic institutions by forging broad social alliances to pursue a well thought out system of wealth distribution that does not alienate the propertied sections of society. With their moderate agrarian policy to accommodate the rural middle class in the power structure, the parliamentary left never became an effective mouthpiece of the poorest of the poor, the landless laborers, and thus failed to mobilize them for their ideological battle. This failure created a natural constituency for the Maoists in rural India, especially in those areas where the incumbent left government agreed to follow a forcible land acquisition policy for private investment even at the cost of displacing the local inhabitants. In the changed environment of globalization, the economic scene has suddenly shifted, and concern for the poorest of the poor seems to have considerably disappeared. There is hardly a difference in the perception between the parliamentary left and other leading bourgeois political parties in this regard: by agreeing to follow a neoliberal path of development, both the left and its *bête noire* do not appear to be ideologically different at all.

II

The principal argument that the book therefore makes relates to the growing importance of the left parties in India's liberal democratic governance. It is now evident that the parliamentary left parties, instead of emphasizing "class antagonism" as a means for the establishment of an egalitarian society, seem to have confirmed their clear antipathy toward violence by accepting election as a meaningful instrument of socio-economic changes. The parliamentary left appears to have flourished in circumstances in which the state is utilized for facilitating "development with redistribution." Once elected to power, the communist party, as the records show, has thus "transformed from an essentially agitating and confrontational force to an administrative patronage-dispensing institution."³ Drawing on a social alliance of apparently contradictory class forces, the reformist left parties sustain their viability as a democratically elected government within an economy that is not favorably disposed toward the classical ideological goal of the left. There is no doubt that the political power of the left depends on the degree to which it has consolidated its social base through legal and extra-parliamentary struggles. While the party leadership is a significant determinant of success, its chances are also circumscribed by its organic relationship with the party managers at the grassroots. By a well-knit organizational network (sustained in a Stalinist way), the parliamentary left maintains and retains a support base that crumbles once mass disenchantment leads to the rise and consolidation of parallel power centers capable of challenging those in power. Unlike the parliamentary left that keeps on changing its ideological strategies, Maoism is an ideological continuation of the past, and yet it is also a contextual response to the peculiar Indian

reality that differs radically from one place to another. In the past, ultra-left movements seem to have uncritically accepted the “one size fits all” approach by accepting the classical Marxism–Leninism as sacrosanct. Given the obvious socio-economic and cultural diversity of the continental variety, India can never be comprehended in a single axis. By being sensitive to this well-entrenched diversity, Maoism has reinvented Marxism–Leninism in a most creative fashion by rejecting the straight-jacketed Marxist–Leninist formula of socio-economic changes. Even within India, the issues that the Maoists raise differ radically from one state to another. In Andhra Pradesh, Maoism draws, for instance, on anti-feudal sentiments whereas in the tribal belt of Orissa and Chhattisgarh rights over forest produce remain the most effective demand for political mobilization. This context-driven articulation of Maoism is certainly a critical factor in its emergence as perhaps the most effective ideological voice of the downtrodden, notwithstanding the determination of a coercive state to crush the campaign.

III

Communism in India is uniquely textured. By discarding the violent revolutionary method of capturing power, the parliamentary left has, for instance, flourished because of its success in pursuing effective policies of “redistribution” of basic economic resources within the parliamentary form of governance. So, domestic imperatives transformed Indian communism into a movement with legitimacy among the dispossessed sections through the middle classes, not the wretched of the earth, which was always the main constituency of the communist revolutionary movements elsewhere. The middle class has remained at the helm of the affairs. The movement achieved electoral success but “paradoxically failed to advance communism.”⁴ It is thus argued that the parliamentary communism, despite being a significant political force in contemporary Indian politics, has ceased to be a movement for revolutionary changes in India. There is thus an ideological vacuum that is filled by the Maoists who have successfully mobilized the exploited masses for movements as possibly the only way out of their subhuman existence. Maoism in India has thus provided the dispossessed with a powerful voice to challenge the prevalent class balances that support high economic and income disparity and exploitation of the impoverished. It is also an ideological challenge against “an extremely oppressive social system, where those at the bottom of multiple layers of disadvantage live in condition of extreme disempowerment.”⁵

India’s development strategy since independence was hardly adequate to eradicate the sources of discontent rooted in massive economic imbalances in most parts of the country. The history of India’s political economy since independence in 1947 reveals how policy paralysis retarded India’s growth to a considerable extent. By their preference for the state-led planned economic development, the founding fathers championed the role of the state in guiding the economic system “in a desired direction by means of intentionally planned and rationally coordinated state policies” in which inputs from the

grassroots were hardly taken into account.⁶ Planning thus became a mere bureaucratic function and was “institutionalized . . . as a domain of policymaking outside the normal processes of representative politics.”⁷ As an integral bureaucratic wing of the state, the planning commission, which was a unconstitutional body, had an unassailable position in the government because of the functions it discharged within the government. It became a “demi-god” that was responsible for disbursing funds for development in accordance with what the principal political functionaries in government felt appropriate for development. It is therefore not surprising that, despite the claim of the planners that they brought about a balanced growth of the country as a whole, India continues to suffer from lopsided growth. With planners as drivers for economic growth, the founding fathers hoped to distribute the fruits of growth equitably, of course, with an emphasis on the eradication of poverty. By adopting the mixed economy strategy, the nationalist elites created space for businesses to participate in this task. It was a creative arrangement that did not, however, yield results to the extent expected because of the stringent application of “the licence-permit-quota-raj”⁸ by the Indian state to translate into action the plan-led development strategies. The result was “tragic” because the Indian economy “had grown too slowly to qualify as a capitalist economy . . . [and] by its failure to reduce inequalities had forfeited any claims to being socialist.”⁹ Explaining the failure of the state-led development paradigm in India, Atul Kohli argues:

The Achilles heel of Indian political economy is not so much its statist model of development as much as the mismatch between the statist model and the limited capacity of the state to guide social and economic change. . . . [By] trying to reconcile political preferences of both the left and right in the context of a fragmented state, [the Indian policymakers] failed both at radical redistribution and at ruthless capitalism-led economic growth.¹⁰

The enthusiasm for the role that the public sector would play in achieving balanced economic growth was short lived. Except for financial enterprises in banking, insurance, and petroleum-producing enterprises, none of the public sector units became viable.¹¹ This created a paradoxical situation. While “socialist rhetoric” was useful for building and sustaining “a stable political base” for the ruling authority, the failure of the state to effectively pursue the pro-poor developmental strategies and policies eroded the base that was built out of mass euphoria over the acceptance of the socialistic pattern of society. As a result, not only were businesses alienated because of the state’s insistence on socialistic policies, but the poor also felt cheated since the attack on poverty was largely confined to slogans. This perhaps explains why “the state-led economic growth or political efforts at redistributions and poverty alleviation” did not succeed to the extent that they did in Korea, where the state pushed (rather ruthlessly) capitalist growth, or in China, which followed state-directed radical poverty alleviation programs.¹² Nonetheless, the Nehruvian socialist

pattern of society cannot be so easily dispensed with for historical reasons; globalization without shackles may not be an appropriate strategy for economic development in a poor country like India because in its present form, argues Joseph Stiglitz, it seems like “a pact with the devil.” A few people may have become wealthier, but, for most of the people, closer integration into the global economy “has brought greater volatility and insecurity, and more inequality.”¹³ Economic liberalization is thus a double-edged sword that, while improving the lives of some Indians, has also left millions more untouched. Hence it has been rightly pointed out that the essence of economic liberalization in India can be captured in the Buddhist proverb “The key to the gate of heaven is also the key that could open the gate to hell.” Indeed, danger and opportunity are so intricately intermingled in economic reforms that “the journey to the promised land of [economic prosperity] could easily turn into a hellish nightmare of poverty and widening inequality for the majority.”¹⁴ It is therefore not surprising that economic reforms, instead of contributing to a balanced economic growth, have caused mass resentment among the dispossessed who are effectively exploited by radical groups for their own gain. In other words, the impact of neo-liberal economic reforms is paradoxical. On the one hand, the opening up of foreign markets has generated skilled employment and enormous wealth, shared fairly widely among the benefited section of the population. On the other hand, foreign operators who have been allowed to extract mineral resources from various parts of the country will deprive many people of their principal source of livelihood and their land-connected social identity. The wealth accrued from mining goes to the mine owners and the political class that works in connivance with them. Those losing out are the villagers beneath whose land lie the precious minerals. As a result, they will be “rendered homeless and assetless, and left to cope with the degradation of the ecosystem that will be the inevitable consequence of open-cast mining.”¹⁵ What is at stake here is neither development nor industrialization but the issues of justice and democracy because “in the name of development and industrialization, the common resources of the country are being handed over to private corporations by displacing those who have inhabited that land for centuries.”¹⁶

The phase that began with the official acceptance of economic liberalization is different from what had gone on before on various counts. Besides the obvious drawbacks of market-driven development plans, this phase also included mass mobilization regarding numerous “new macro issues,” particularly the environment and displacement of people due to indiscriminate industrialization. The indigenous population seems to have been hard hit, and it is therefore not surprising that Maoism has struck an emotional chord with the tribal population in areas where forest land is being taken away for industrial purposes at the cost of the habitat. By challenging the land grabbing by the industrial houses and the government, the Maoists in these areas have become the “true savior” of the tribal population. In fact, this is a major factor explaining the growing consolidation of Maoism in a large number of constituent Indian states. Besides attacking feudal forces, the Maoist radicals have also championed the cause of the indigenous population who lost their land due to reckless mining operations at the behest of the state.

The increasing importance of Maoism and the parliamentary left is an outcome of the steady democratization of the political processes with the participation of the masses not only during elections but also in the interim period. In other words, sustained participation of the people in the democratic processes has created a process that has gone beyond mere voting by empowering the people in a manner that has radically changed the contours of Indian politics. The process is getting translated as rage and revolt, making India “a country of a million little mutinies.”¹⁷ But these mutinies have created tangible space for democratic aspiration to flourish. They also make the state available for those who were previously peripheral to any political transactions. The process is significant for another related reason, namely, that the democratic empowerment of the lower strata of society and formerly excluded groups has led to an articulation of voices that had remained “feeble” in the past. Since these groups interpreted their disadvantage and lack of dignity in caste terms, “social antagonism and competition for state benefits expressed themselves increasingly in the form of intense caste rivalries.”¹⁸ Thus the growing importance of caste in contemporary Indian politics is essentially a modern phenomenon and not a mere continuation of the past. This is theoretically puzzling since caste-specific action in India, articulated in modern political vocabulary, cannot be comprehended within the available liberal democratic discourses unless one is drawn to the empirical context that radically differs from the typical liberal society in the West. In the changed socio-economic context, caste has gained salience because of its “‘encashability in politics’ [which] is now dominated by the numerically stronger lower and middle castes [and] the upper castes are now facing a very real reverse discrimination.”¹⁹ Thus democratization seems to have set in motion a process whereby peripheral sections of society who were previously delinked from the political processes because of well-entrenched caste prejudices have become politically significant due to their sheer demographic prevalence in socially segregated India. This may sound paradoxical since democratization, as an empowering process, has made the numerically stronger sections aware of their importance in contemporary politics without undermining the caste identity that brings people together irrespective of class differences. In this sense, democratization seems to have legitimized the caste system by reaffirming its role in cementing a bond among various social groups whose members, despite being differently placed in class terms, are drawn to each other because of their inherent affiliations.

Politicization and democratization seem to be dialectically interlinked. As a result, the outcome of this intermingling may not be predictable. In a typical Western liberal context, deepening of democracy invariably leads to consolidation of liberal values. In the Indian context, democratization is translated in the greater involvement of people not as individuals, which is the staple of liberal discourse, but as communities or groups. Similarly, a large section of women is being drawn to the political processes not as women *per se* or individuals but as members of a community holding a sectoral identity. Community identity thus becomes a critical governing force. It is not therefore surprising that the so-called peripheral groups continue to maintain the social identities (caste, religion, or sect)

to which they belong while getting involved in the political processes, despite the fact that the political goals of various social groups remain more or less identical. Nonetheless, steady democratization has contributed to the articulation of a political voice, until now unheard of, which is reflective of radical changes in the texture of politics. By helping to articulate the political voice of the marginalized, democracy in India has led to “a loosening of social strictures” and empowered the peripherals to be confident of their ability to improve the socio-economic conditions in which they are placed.²⁰ This is a significant political process resulting in what is euphemistically characterized as a “silent revolution” through a meaningful transfer of power from the upper caste elites to various subaltern groups within the democratic framework of public governance.²¹ Rajni Kothari captures this change by saying that “a new democratic process” seems to have begun “at a time when the old democracy is failing to deliver the goods [leading to] a new revolution representing new social churnings that are already under way . . . in the electoral and party processes, as also within the deeper arenas of the non-party political processes.”²² It is true that democracy in India has given voice to the peripherals. What is ironic is its failure to create an adequate space in which “a sense of public purpose can be articulated.” Hence, citizens are “left with a profound sense of disenchantment.” A pattern seems to have developed where “individuals and groups expend inordinate energy to colonize or capture government institutions in seeking to promote their interests over others; there is much activity in politics, but little of it is directed to public purposes that all can share.”²³ In theoretical terms, the process can be said to have led to what Anne Philips calls “the politics of presence,”²⁴ which is articulated as responses of the “dispossessed or disinherited” to social exclusion, nurtured by age-old socio-economic imbalances. What is critical here is “the presence of a voice,” powerful indeed on occasions, testifying to the resentment of “the marginalized” seeking to redress their genuine grievances within the democratic space available. In this sense, the politics of presence can metaphorically be described as “nurseries” of “the politics of violence” if the former is found to be inadequate in addressing meaningfully “the well-entrenched social exclusion” on ethnic, racial, religious, or gender considerations.²⁵ This is a major paradox in Indian democracy that, while it certainly gave voice to the masses, failed to make the *vox populi* or the voice of the people meaningful in governance. It is thus being increasingly felt that “representative democracy . . . has failed and has become more oppressive and serves the interest of the market and acts as a collaborator of global market-capitalists.”²⁶ Nonetheless, the state no longer remains “an external entity” to the people presumably as “a result of the deepening reach of the developmental state under conditions of electoral democracy.”²⁷ The increasing democratization (whether through electoral politics or otherwise) resulting in the participation of the socio-economically peripheral sections in the political processes therefore seems to have articulated alternative discourses by challenging the state-sponsored market-centric neo-liberal policies.

The introduction of market-driven economic reforms in 1991 in India was ostensibly due to a fiscal crisis that the Indian state had overcome with financial support from the

World Bank and International Monetary Fund. However, the reforms hardly brought benefits to the marginalized. Furthermore, the opening of the economy also legitimized the operation of the private players in the domestic economy, and, as a facilitating measure, Special Economic Zones (SEZ) were created by forceful acquisition of prime agricultural land for industrial purposes, which rendered the land-dependent population jobless and homeless. The SEZs are those special-earmarked territories that are duty-free and tax-free enclaves that are considered “privileged territories” for trade operations and tariffs. Their ostensible purpose is to attract large volumes of investment by providing “world-class infrastructural facilities, a favorable taxation regime, and incentives for sectoral clustering.”²⁸ SEZs offered the neoliberal state a means to accomplish its ideological goals, and it was a policy decision supportive of private investment for rapid economic development facilitated by the state. True to its newly acquired neoliberal role, the state was not hesitant to undertake even coercive measures to forcibly acquire land for these private operators because they felt that opposition to the SEZ policy threatened “to sabotage the dream of a more prosperous, efficient and powerful India.”²⁹ This led to mass consternation especially in the tribal districts of Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh, which the left-wing extremists exploited to build a stable social base in opposition to the displacement and dispossession of the indigenous population. At the heart of the protests were “the perceived abuses of the Land Acquisition Act.”³⁰ To the affected population, the SEZ policy was not for economic growth but a means for fulfilling the partisan aims of the global capital that had devastated India’s rural economy in league with the state. A party document underlines the adverse human consequence of SEZ:

Today the reactionary ruling classes of the country are bent upon transforming vast tracts of fertile agricultural land into neo-colonial enclaves even if it means enacting blood-baths all over the country. . . . The CPI (Maoist) calls upon the oppressed masses, particularly the peasantry, to transform every SEZ into a battle zone, to kick out the real outsiders—the rapacious MNCs, comprador big business houses, their (boot lickers) and the land mafia—who are snatching away their lands and all means of livelihood and colonizing the country.³¹

As a result, the state that zealously pursued the path of reforms seems to have lost its credibility with those involved in the “everyday struggle” for mere survival. The period since the late 1980s has thus seen growing resistance to such policies by the dispossessed groups in different parts of the country. The Red Corridor is also described as “the mineral corridor,” given the rich reserve of minerals in this large tract of tribe-inhabited areas. The Maoists aim to resist “the handover of mineral wealth of India to multinationals and foreign capitalists”³² by transforming the area into a war zone. This is a different kind of war being waged in parts of India where people “are fighting in their own territory to save their land, forest, water, minerals from being grabbed and they are convinced

that they have an alternate vision, not just for themselves, the Adivasis, but for Indian people as a whole.”³³ In such volatile circumstances, the installation of the SEZs seems to have provoked new issues and resistance movements even in areas which were, until then, free from Maoist radical politics. It is therefore not just coincidental, as will be shown in chapter 4, that localities rose in rebellion against the ruling parliamentary left in West Bengal when the incumbent Left Front forcibly took over land from the farmers in Nandigram and Singur for an automobile factory. The forcible land acquisition led to the fusion of diverse strands of discontent into a powerful political movement. Maoists were reported to have participated in the movement against forcible land acquisition, which was basically a spontaneous mass outburst in opposition to the policy of dispossession. Even without being ideologically compatible, several bourgeois political outfits joined the resistance movement against land acquisition. This suggests, perhaps, the building of a powerful critique through pertinent questions regarding the applicability of neoliberal economic reforms in India where the proportion of people living below the poverty line is staggeringly high. So, SEZs are not merely an articulation of a specific form of economic development, but they are also ideological tools to pursue an alternative path of development. In this path the stakeholders are informed but not at all consulted, while the state seeks to integrate India with global capitalism through neoliberal economic reforms.

IV

This book provides a synthesized account of the rise, consolidation, and the changing nature of communism in India by focusing on its two different faces, which have identical Marxist–Leninist ideological goals. While the parliamentary left gave up militancy and decided to build mass support around reformist social democratic and regional nationalist themes, its *bête noire*, the Maoists, continue to pursue violent revolutionary means in their endeavor to achieve an exploitation-free and classless society in India. This is broadly the story that will be told in seven chapters. Before presenting the narrative, a note of caution is in order. In the book, the terms Naxalite and Maoist are used interchangeably, as is usually the case in the government reports and other nonofficial accounts. However, there are differences if one is sensitive to the historical roots of these two ideologically complementary socio-economic and political movements, notwithstanding their similar intellectual legacies. While the Naxalbari movement, organized in the 1960s, consolidated the ultra-left wing extremists, it gradually dissipated. Still, it continued to remain ideologically inspiring to new groups of activists subscribing to Marxism–Leninism and Maoism. There were various left radical organizations that built solid social bases in different Indian states. Since 2004, with the coming together of these groups under the Communist Party of India (Maoist), left-wing extremism not only became a powerful ideological force but also a strong political platform to pursue the Marxist–Leninist and

Maoist socio-economic design of human emancipation. Despite having identical intellectual lineage, the erstwhile Naxalbari movement and contemporary Maoism are different, as will be shown in chapter 5, presumably because of the contextual variations in which they had their organic roots. For the Maoists, state enthusiasm for neoliberal economic reforms unfolds newer contradictions that the Naxalites did not confront. The Naxalbari movement was primarily an anti-feudal crusade while its contemporary counterpart, Maoism, is a challenge to the global corporate magnates and their local allies, besides being an ideologically charged endeavor against well-entrenched feudal socio-economic values and their political mentors.

The story of communism in India also reveals that, despite maintaining a universal ideological perception, Marxism–Leninism is articulated differently in different parts of the globe presumably because of the different nature and texture of human exploitation in specific socio-economic contexts. Besides its class dynamics, exploitation in India has multiple axes around caste, religion, ethnicity, and regions. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that class identity is enmeshed in one's caste, religious, ethnic, and regional location. Thus, to comprehend the contextual roots of Indian communism and the factors contributing to its sustenance and expansion, one needs to be sensitive to the wider socio-economic and political environment not only to grasp the phenomenon but also to conceptualize its peculiar texture in a post-colonial context.

To provide an analytical narrative, the book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the parliamentary left by reference to its contextual socio-cultural and political roots in Tripura, Kerala, and West Bengal, respectively, and Part II is devoted to left-wing extremism, christened as Maoism in India, that has flourished as a powerful ideological tool at the hands of the impoverished against the exploitation of human beings by human beings. In this first part, there are four chapters, each focusing on the distinctive experience of the parliamentary left in Tripura, Kerala, and West Bengal. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the specific nature of the parliamentary left in Tripura and Kerala, and chapters 3 and 4 discuss how it has evolved, consolidated, and finally declined as a significant political force in West Bengal over a period of more than three decades. The story of the left consolidation and its gradual decimation in West Bengal, one of the major left bastions in India, also reveals the evident weaknesses of social democracy as an ideology, especially in a transitional society like India where primordial values of caste, clan, and ethnicity seem to have been critical in one's political choice. Whereas the parliamentary left is confined to three Indian states, its counterpart, left-wing extremism, is reportedly expanding its sphere of influence every day. Part II thus concentrates on Maoism, the Indian variety of left-wing extremism. Based on a historical-sociological understanding of the phenomenon, chapter 5 provides an account of its growth and consolidation in various parts of India essentially as a Marxist–Leninist political platform seeking to radically alter India's semi-colonial and semi-feudal political authority supportive of vested socio-economic interests. Chapter 6 is an elaboration of the Maoist blueprint for future India as well as an ideology-driven contextual critique of neoliberal political economy. Not only is this chapter

illustrative of the distinctive Maoist approach to contemporary India's socio-economic reality, it also seeks to articulate a persuasive methodological alternative for understanding a transitional society in a non-Western context. The final chapter is a stock-taking exercise. By assessing Maoism as an ideological assault on the Indian state, chapter 7 seeks to intervene in the wider debate regarding its nature: given the growing number of violent attacks in the recent past on the symbols of institutionalized political authorities in various parts of the country, resulting in the brutal killing of innocent people, can Maoism be recognized as a rightful step toward a rightful cause? The question is difficult and does not have a clear-cut answer, but it is indicative of a quest for an alternative ideological path based on a creative blending of Marxism–Leninism with Mao Tse-Tung's socio-political ideas.

In light of a detailed discussion of communism in India in its two manifestations, the book makes two arguments. First, by ideologically pursuing the social democratic line of thinking, more or less in a typical Bernsteinian way, India's parliamentary left is an innovative socio-political design that flourished in specific socio-economic and political circumstances. That it remains confined to West Bengal, Tripura, and Kerala just confirms the validity of a contextual explanation of its consolidation anywhere else other than these three states. The second argument is linked with the growing popularity of Maoism as a pro-people ideology, especially among the vulnerable sections in the face of ruthless repression by the state. Concomitant to this is a complementary argument that despite having engaged with the masses at the grassroots in their struggle for existence, the hegemony of the Stalinist-feudal mindset in the Maoist organization seems to have degraded its ideological salience even to the extent of considerably eroding its base. Nonetheless, on the basis of an overall assessment of two versions of communism in India, Maoism is an ideology-driven political challenge seeking to build an innovative theoretical critique of the neoliberal avalanche that appears to have crippled the parliamentary left. Instead of creatively reassessing the role of global capital in the changed milieu, the parliamentary left exposed its ideological bankruptcy by agreeing to steer the economy in accordance with its dictation, and this is where the debate starts.

PART I

Parliamentary Left in India



THE PARLIAMENTARY LEFT in India is a revisionist socio-economic and political design conceived in a post-colonial situation. Uniquely textured, it is also an ideological response to the claim that without revolutionary violence, social change, in its essence, can never be accomplished. Rooted in the Marxist–Leninist understanding of the stages of the growth of human civilization, the parliamentary method is perhaps the most effective strategy in a liberal-democratic polity to create circumstances for radical social changes. By agreeing to align the institutional facilities in accordance with the ideological priorities, the left has not only reinvented classical Marxism–Leninism in a liberal democratic context, but it has also brought to light the relative utility of social democratic methods, especially when revolution to bring about a classless society is a remote and unrealistic possibility. There is no doubt that parliamentary democratic means are perhaps the most effective in a transitional society that is not yet ready for radical social transformation in the classical Marxist–Leninist sense because democracy “is a condition of socialism to a much greater degree than is assumed, i.e., it is not only the means but also the substance.”¹ For the left clinging to the parliamentary-democratic line of thinking, democracy represents “an absence of class government, as the indication of a social condition where political privilege belongs to no one class as opposed to the whole community.”² Given the effective role in addressing the genuine socio-economic problems of the aggrieved section of the masses, the constitutional legislation is always considered to be “stronger than the revolution scheme where prejudice and limited horizon of the great mass of the people appear as hindrances to social progress, and it offers greater advantages where it is a question of

the creation of permanent economic arrangements capable of lasting; in other words, it is best adapted to positive social-political work.”³

In this context, the role of the parliamentary left is most critical in organizing the underprivileged “to fight for all reforms in the state which are adapted to raise [the deprived] and to transform the state in the direction of democracy.”⁴ Thus, reform is a predominant means of meaningful social change in a milieu where the revolution in the classical Marxist–Leninist sense seems to be a distant possibility. The parliamentary left is thus a powerful conceptualization within the classical Marxist–Leninist paradigm showing how the prevalent system of governance can be directed to achieve revolutionary socio-economic and political transformation without disturbing existing class relations. This is what perhaps explains the growing ascendancy of social democracy as an ideological path even in countries where the situation is propitious to pursue a radical means for revolutionary aims. Genuine parliamentary institutions are effective in radically altering the prevalent socio-economic texture through reforms.⁵

The parliamentary left is a powerful institutional force in Indian politics. Even before it became an important constituent of a national coalition (2004–2008), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI [M])-led Left Front was critically important in the three Indian states of Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura. Though the Communist Party was founded in the 1920s, it was not until the late 1930s that it had become a significant political force, succeeding in building a stable social base among the peasants and workers through its leadership of peasant movements and trade unions. With the election of two of its members to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1946, the Communist Party began a long journey of its parliamentary career in an Indian state that would become its bastion in the days to come. Jyoti Basu,⁶ who was trained as a barrister in England and had a long involvement with the All India Railwaymen’s Federation, rose to prominence after being elected from the Railways constituency. Christened as “the star performer of the left,”⁷ Basu remained an important ideologue supporting the social democratic line of thinking that loomed large in post-independent India. From 1952, the party acquired “a parliamentary forum of consequences as the leading opposition party in West Bengal.”⁸ The transformation was not free from friction: a section within the party accused the party high command of “chauvinism,” saying that “the revisionist clique has given up the path of international proletarianism and taken to blind nationalism and betrayal of the revolutionary masses and working class.”⁹ Not only was the parliamentary left subject to severe criticisms, its top leaders were hounded by the radical section in Calcutta while they sought to persuade their opponents to accept social democratic means of mass awakening.¹⁰ Interestingly, the majority of the left-wing radicals in Bengal accepted the parliamentary method notwithstanding their active participation in the Tebhaga movement in 1946–1947,¹¹ a left-wing extremist agrarian movement following more or less the classical Marxist–Leninist path of revolutionary transformation. West

Bengal readily accepted the communists, presumably because of their sustained pro-people activities at the grassroots. These activities paid off once the communists approached voters for their support in elections. At the same time, in the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh, where the parliamentary path had not developed organic roots, the radical section within the Communist Party launched an agrarian struggle against the Nizam-supported local feudal landlords. As history shows, left-wing extremism developed as a powerful ideological challenge involving the people at the grassroots level. Maoism, the twenty-first-century manifestation of left-wing extremism, is undoubtedly a critical political force in Andhra Pradesh, where the parliamentary left never became a significant political force.

For the communists, the parliamentary path was the best strategic means to chart out a pro-people course of action, which the bourgeois forces were simply incapable of pursuing. With the acceptance of a social democratic line of thinking, the party thus announced in its program:

The Party will utilize all the opportunities that present themselves of bringing into existence government pledged to carry out a modest programme of giving immediate relief to the people. The formation of such governments will give great fillip to the revolutionary movement of the working people and thus help the process of building the democratic front. It however, would not solve the economic and political problems of the nation in any fundamental manner. The Party therefore will continue utilizing all opportunities for forming such governments of a transitional character which give immediate relief to the people and strengthening the mass movement.¹²

The above party resolution is illustrative of the argument that the parliamentary path is an appropriate transitional means to get the best and maximum benefit for the people, even within the bourgeois system of governance. In a typical Bernsteinian way, the party also reiterates the importance of creating a democratic front involving the underprivileged for the final assault on the class-divided social system. Despite being transitional, the governments, formed by the parliamentary left, are likely to reshape the available structure of authority by making people integral to its articulation and functioning.

With a definite ideological mandate, the parliamentary left formed governments in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura. By adopting revolutionary agrarian and pro-worker reforms, the parliamentary communists were also able to create stable social bases in these three Indian states. Except in Kerala, where the left was voted out of power at regular intervals, the parliamentary left continued in power in West Bengal until 2011. Tripura is the only Indian state where the left has been in power without interruption since 1993. Besides having adopted far-reaching agrarian reforms, what accounts for the continuity of the Left Fronts in West Bengal and Tripura was certainly the absence of a