

Jyoti Basu: elder statesman of Indian Stalinism dies at 95

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Jyoti Basu, the reputed elder statesman of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—India’s principal Stalinist parliamentary party—and for 23 years the Chief Minister of the east Indian state of West Bengal died Sunday. He was 95.

Although Basu retired as West Bengal’s Chief Minister in 2000, he remained a major figure in Indian politics up until the last months of his life.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who is celebrated by big business as the architect of India’s post-1991 neo-liberal economic “reform” program and of a strategic partnership with US imperialism, led the entire Indian political elite in praising Basu. “I have personally had a very long association with *Shri* Basu,” declared Singh. “On many occasions in my career, I turned to him for his sagacious advice on all matters, whether they related to West Bengal or to issues of national importance.”

Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, hailed Basu as a “warrior for social justice and equality ... a true patriot who always put the national interest above all else.” His “superb judgment and depth of experience was valued greatly.”

Gandhi even compared Basu’s impact on her life to that of her mother-in-law, the former prime minister Indira Gandhi, and her husband, Rajiv Gandhi, also an assassinated former prime minister. “Together with Indiraji and Rajiviji, I have held [Basu] in the highest esteem.”

Gushing praise for the CPM stalwart also came from titans of industry and leaders of India’s major establishment parties, including the Hindu supremacist BJP.

Ratan Tata, the chairman of India’s most prominent multinational company, Tata Industries, proclaimed Basu “a great leader of the nation and West Bengal.”

R.P. Goenka, the retired chairman of the giant RPG group said, “India is poorer for the demise of Jyoti Basu.”

Confederation of Indian Industry President Venu Srinivasan described Basu as one India’s “tallest leaders”.

United Progressive Alliance Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee noted that Basu had played a critical role in the formation of the Congress Party-led UPA government in 2004, helping corral various regional and caste-based parties into joining with the CPM-led Left Front to bring a Congress Party-led government to office. At Basu’s urging, the CPM continued to prop up the UPA for four years even as it pursued right-wing socio-economic and foreign policies—policies that even the Stalinists conceded were little different from those pursued by the previous BJP-dominated government.

If truth be told, on four occasions in the past two decades—1989, 1991, 1996 and 2004—Basu and the CPM Politburo played an important, if not pivotal role, in the formation of India’s national governments.

In 1996 Basu almost became prime minister of a so-called United Front-Left government. His nomination was blocked when a majority of the

CPM Politburo voted against participating in the government. Instead the CPM supported the United Front government from the “outside,” all the while helping formulate government policy and keeping the ramshackle United Front coalition together.

Several years later, Basu termed the 1996 Politburo vote an “historic blunder.”

Only at the party’s most recent triennial party congress, last spring, did the top leadership of the CPM bend to Basu’s entreaties that he be allowed to step down as a regular member of the Politburo, having served continuously on the CPM’s top leadership body for 45 years dating back to the party’s 1964 break-away from the CPI. Nevertheless he was prevailed upon to accept the position of “Special Invitee to the Politburo.”

Jyoti Kiran Basu was born July 8, 1914, just weeks before the outbreak of World War I, into a well-to-do, middle-class Calcutta family. His father was a doctor and his mother, the daughter of East Bengal landowners, was, as was traditional at the time, a housewife. Basu attended elite private English-language schools, ultimately obtaining a Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree from the University of Calcutta’s Presidency College.

In 1935, Basu went to England so as to study law and become a barrister. Soon after his arrival, he became involved in the anti-British imperialist movement among Indian students and thereby came into the orbit of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

In his memoirs, Basu says little about his ostensible conversion from Indian nationalism to Marxism. But he does report a conversation he had after he had already begun his schooling by the Stalinist CPGB with Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress leader and future prime minister of independent India, during one of the latter’s visits to Britain.

“I remember,” writes Basu, “telling Nehru ‘I believe in socialism.’ Nehru had replied, ‘Our first task is to earn freedom for India. Do you people agree with this?’ I replied in the affirmative and invited him to a reception function [organized by the Indian students].”

Basu was attracted to and politically trained by the CPGB in the middle and late 1930s. This was the height of the Popular Front, when the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, to enthusiastic applause from the CPGB leadership, was orchestrating the Moscow Trials, organizing the assassination of Leon Trotsky, and in the name of the Popular Front—a reputed anti-fascist alliance with the democratic imperialists—was strangling the European revolution, most graphically and tragically in Spain.

According to Basu, his principal teachers were CPGB General Secretary Harry Pollitt and such other notorious hand-raisers for Stalin as Rajani Palme Dutt and Clemens Dutt.

Central to the politics in which they instructed Basu were the Stalinist doctrine of “socialism in one country” and the Stalinist-Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution—the claim that in countries of belated capitalist development, such as India, the task of Marxists is to assist the national bourgeoisie in fulfilling the democratic or anti-imperialist revolution. Ignoring both the positive experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution and

the crushing of the Chinese revolution by the bourgeois Kuomintang in 1927, the Stalinists insisted that the working class can not and should not challenge for leadership until the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, the consolidation of capitalism, and the ultimate “maturation” of the conditions for socialism.

Basu returned to India at the beginning of 1941 and subsequently joined the Communist Party of India or CPI. Soon after his return, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and the CPI emerged as a staunch supporter of the British war effort, insisting that the struggle against British rule in India had to be postponed so as not to disrupt Churchill’s and Roosevelt’s military alliance with the USSR. Because of its pro-war and pro-British position, the CPI, for the first time in its history, was allowed to carry out political activity in its own name. One of its first acts was to oppose the 1942 Quit India movement, a Congress Party initiated campaign of mass civil disobedience that quickly escaped the Congress leadership and became a quasi-insurrection against British rule. Tens of thousands of British troops had to be mobilized to suppress it.

With the end of the war, India was convulsed by worker and peasants struggles that were of an incipient revolutionary character. While the CPI came into the leadership of various workers and peasant struggles, it directed those under its influence to place pressure on the Congress Party and Muslim League to lead the national-democratic revolution. As a result, the national bourgeoisie was able to contain the mass upsurge, ultimately coming to a deal with British imperialism, under which it inherited the colonial state machine so as to secure the defence of its property and wealth, while the basic problems of the democratic revolution that condemned India’s toilers to subjugation—freedom from imperialist oppression, the liquidation of landlordism and casteism, and the voluntary unification of South Asia—were left to fester.

Toward the end of World War II, Basu became a railway union official and in 1946 he was elected to one of the designated “labor” seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly (a colonial artifice for which only about 10 percent of the male population had the right to vote.) In keeping with the CPI’s reactionary claim that the demand for Pakistan—that is, for the communal partition of the subcontinent—was progressive and represented the Muslim striving for “self determination,” Basu voted for the partition of the British province of Bengal in 1947, with half going to India and the other half to Pakistan, when the issue came before the legislature.

Basu was elected to the West Bengal state assembly in India’s first post-independence elections in 1951-52. He was named the head of the CPI’s delegation in the assembly and would remain head or de facto head of the CPI’s and then the CPM’s West Bengal state assembly party until his retirement in 2000.

By the early 1960s, the CPI was in increasing crisis. While this crisis was to a considerable extent rooted in dissension over the party leadership’s close relations with the Congress Party, even after the Congress government had removed the CPI-led government in Kerala, it was exacerbated by the 1962 Sino-Indian border war and the Sino-Soviet split.

Basu, apparently with considerable reluctance, joined a dissident walkout in 1964 and was one of the nine members elected to the CPM’s Politburo at the party’s birth. West Bengal, it need be noted, was one of the centers of the opposition to the “revisionist” CPI and Basu’s parliamentary career would likely have been seriously harmed had he not joined the new party.

The founding document of the CPM affirmed its enduring commitment to the Menshevik-Stalinist two-stage theory. It declared that sections of the Indian bourgeoisie, including elements of the big bourgeoisie, will be driven into conflict with imperialism and “compelled to come into opposition with state power” and, therefore, can “find a place in the people’s democratic front.”

CPI cadres influenced by Maoist theories of protracted peasant-based

guerrilla warfare as the means of leading the democratic revolution to victory participated in the founding of the CPM. But the new party did not align itself with China, let alone embrace Maoism.

Rather the CPM took an independent, Indian nationalist direction, declaring its support for neither Moscow or Beijing. Like the pre-split CPI, it continued to focus its work on parliamentary politics and trade union struggles predicated on an acceptance of the limits of collective bargaining.

By the late 1960s West Bengal and increasingly India as a whole were again rocked by great social struggles.

The Maoists broke away from the CPM to form the CPI (Marxist-Leninist), shortly after seeking to instigate a “people’s war” at Naxalbari, a remote village in northern West Bengal.

Turning their backs on the struggle to politically educate the working class and make it the political spearhead of all the toilers, the Maoists sought to incite revenge attacks on landlords and other petty oppressors. Even more politically destructive, they mounted violent attacks on their CPI and CPM opponents. These tactics only served to spread political confusion and provide the state with the pretext for wholesale repression.

The CPI and CPM, for their part, responded by aligning themselves with the Indian bourgeois state in its campaign to eliminate Naxalism. In 1967-68 and again in 1969-70, the CPM and CPI participated in two short-lived West Bengal United Front governments. These involved various self-proclaimed socialist parties and a breakaway from the Congress Party, the Bangla Congress. In both governments, Basu was deputy to a Bangla Congress Chief Minister.

Ultimately both the CPI and Bangla Congress party made their peace with Indira Gandhi and the Congress party leadership. The CPM then failed to rally parliamentary support for a CPM-led West Bengal government.

According to his Stalinist admirers, Basu’s greatest accomplishment was as architect of West Bengal’s Left Front government which first came to power in the 1977 state elections and has continued to rule the state without interruption to this day.

But the Left Front’s victory came as a shock to Basu and the CPM leadership. They had been ready to form an electoral bloc with the Janata Party—an ad hoc coalition of Indira Gandhi’s bourgeois opponents including the Hindu nationalists formed in 1977 after she had ended the two-year Emergency—for the June 1977 West Bengal elections. They were even prepared to allow Janata nominees to contest a majority of the seats. But the negotiations fell apart when the Janata Party leadership sought to drive a harder bargain.

More fundamentally, throughout the preceding period the CPM had worked to subordinate the working class opposition to the Emergency and the Congress government to its maneuvers with various bourgeois opposition parties, helping pave the way for the Janata Party to win the 1977 elections and for the bourgeoisie to defuse the wave of social unrest that had embroiled India for most of the preceding decade. As for the Stalinist CPI, the CPM’s partners in the West Bengal Left Front, it had supported Indira Gandhi and the Congress government even as it smashed the 1974-75 railway strike and imposed the Emergency.

One further point need be made: If the Indian bourgeoisie was willing to countenance a CPM-led Left Front government, it was because the Stalinists had demonstrated their ruthless defence of the “national interest” by their support for and collaboration with the state suppression of the Naxalites in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Under the Chief Ministership of Jyoti Basu, the West Bengal Left Front government did, in its first years in office, institute some reforms, most significantly a land reform that benefited substantial sections of the peasantry.

But when the Indian bourgeoisie abandoned its historic strategy of state-led national economic development to embrace export-led growth, the

West Bengal government quickly fell in line, embracing privatization and special economic zones, legally prohibiting strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries, and otherwise pursuing pro-big business policies.

In January 2008 Basu forcefully defended his successor, the current West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, after Bhattacharjee had defended his government's pro-investor policies, including the use of police and goon violence to support the expropriation of peasants for special economic zones, by asserting that there is no alternative to capitalist industrialization.

In defending his successor and political pupil Basu declared: "Socialism is not achievable at this point of time. We have been working within the capitalist system and as such private capital has to be used while social welfare programmes by the state government would continue."

He added: "Socialism is a far cry. Socialism is our political agenda and it was mentioned in our party document but capitalism will continue to be the compulsion for the future." The political blindness of this Stalinist veteran becomes all the more glaring when it is realized that these words were uttered just 8 months prior to the historic breakdown of capitalism with the Wall Street meltdown of September 2008.

The accolades being heaped on Basu by the Indian establishment are, from their perspective, richly deserved.

As the principal leader of the CPM, especially during the last quarter century of his life, Basu played a pivotal role in politically suppressing the working class and in assisting the bourgeoisie in confronting numerous crises—from the shipwreck of state-led capitalist development and the political crippling of the Congress Party, through the social crisis produced by neo-liberal "reform" and the destabilizing impact of the bourgeoisie's turn to communal and caste-ist politics as a means of containing social discontent.

In the coming weeks, the *World Socialist Web Site* will have more to say about Basu's political career, because an exposure of the role Indian Stalinism has played in propping up bourgeois rule in India is pivotal for the development of a genuine revolutionary socialist party of the Indian working class.



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