

BOOK REVIEW

Iftikharul Karim
Spring 1979

Radical Politics in West Bengal by Marcus F. Franda
GINT 585 Professor Wirsing

Professor Franda, a political scientist with considerable involvement in Bengali studies, in his book *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, addresses two major tasks : (i) illuminate "diversities within domestic communist movements" and (ii) analyze twentieth century radicalism in Bengal. His political history of leftist movements in Bengal thus focuses particularly upon the genesis and development of the three communist parties of West Bengal and the factors inherent in the Bengali environment which have stood in the way of constructing and sustaining a unified leftist alternative to the Congress.

In explaining communist appeals in West Bengal, Franda identifies the leadership of the Bengali Marxist Left as descendants of the *bhadralok* which in the nineteenth century "experienced a cultural renaissance" only to suffer a set of severe shocks as Bengal lost its political priority in the sub-continent and the economy of the region became subject to increasing domination by non-Bengalis. The *bhadralok*, a "privileged minority most often drawn from the three highest castes...very well-educated, very proud of their language, their literacy

and their history...," performed the renaissance function of reinterpreting Western ideology for indigenous consumption, and found an alternate world view in communism in the 1930's and 1940's. Partition and the rise of the Hindi-speaking political and economic leadership in India have only added to regional resentment since then.

The author identifies three distinct traditions in the West Bengal communist movement which gave birth first to factions within the Communist Party of India and later to the creation of three distinct communist parties: an older generation of political terrorists without strong ideological grounding, descendants of the anarchist groups of the turn of the century, who effectively organized the militant wing of the party (Leftist); a group of intellectuals who were attracted in the 1930's by the ideological appeals of the international communist movement (Rightist); and, a group whose orientation have been to conventional political participation (the Centrists). Thus, the major factional split within the Communist Party of India (CPI) which brought into being the Communist Party Marxist (CPM) in April 1964 was in large part occasioned by Bengali response to the growing Sino-Soviet ideological split and to the Chinese invasion of India in 1962. The creation of the third Communist Party in Bengal, the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (CPML) in 1969, though occasioned by an internal event known as the Naxalbari movement, was nevertheless based also on an ideological response to Mao's indictment of the CPM for aban-

doing guerilla-style revolutionary struggle in favour of participation in the electoral process.

The book provides a rich insight into the personalities, factional conflicts, political events and ways in which public policy and factional conflicts have meshed at significant points in recent history. For all the electoral success and vitality of the Left in West Bengal, Franda's basic argument seems to be that the various Communist and other leftist organizations in Bengal are singularly ill-equipped to make and sustain a revolution. Not only would they have to contend with the problem of making a revolution in one state of a country that is by no means sympathetic to the message of communism, but they would have to recognize the fact that their appeals have their greatest resonance among a displaced elite, an elite which has found it constitutionally difficult to organize and sustain a mass revolutionary base; indeed in Franda's view, that elite lacks a creative revolutionary imagination. Moreover, the problems of the Bengali masses are so acute that one may regard them as almost beyond revolution. Political and economic resources are scarce with the result that the entry of the CPI and CPM into coalition governments led to severe division among the various parties in the coalition, sometimes on ideological grounds but also over the rewards of power. Furthermore the Central Government has shown itself increasingly willing to exercise force to prevent communist activity from proceeding beyond a certain point.

It is the author's analysis of communism in a Bengli environment which is especially commendable. For Franda, the indigenous environment is not merely caste, kin and the pool of religious symbols, but the historical situation of twentieth century Bengal itself. Partition, refugees, famine, communalism and general political and economic decline are equally significant environmental factors. Therefore, as one of his major conclusions, Franda argues that "the sources of Bengali communism are primarily regional, being intimately related to the decline of Bengal in this century and to the Bengali search for a new regional identity and regional political power."