

18/7 I have to follow capitalism: Buddha

Chaitanya Kalbag
Kolkata, July 18

July 19, 07.

IT IS like being thrown about in an ideological cocktail shaker. You get off a gleaming passenger jet and drive over a soaring expressway to the 227-year-old Writers' Buildings in Kolkata to meet a very capitalist communist politician.

West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee says there is no place for jobless growth, and now that the communists' radical land reform, which broke up large zamindar land-holdings among small and marginal share-croppers, has nearly run its course, the logical next step is industrialisation. This is not music to the ears of the CPI(M)'s allies in the Left Front coalition that has ruled the state, unchallenged, for the past 30 years.

"I am very clear in my mind. This is capitalism. I just cannot build socialism in one part of the country. They (leftist critics) theoretically cannot accept this position. Academically they cannot accept this position. I cannot build socialism in one state of India. I have to follow capitalism. But we have to protect against the negative effects of a capitalist society," Bhattacharjee told the *Hindustan Times* in an exclusive two-hour interview.

I have to follow capitalism: Buddha

July 19, 07. West Bengal chief minister in conversation with Chaitanya Kalbag

Continued from Page 1

"The world is changing. Communists are also changing. We can't stick to our old dogmas. Deng Xiaoping used to say 'Learn truth from the facts, not from dogmas.'"

The Left Front won power for the seventh straight time in the May 2006 state elections, with 235 seats in the 294-seat legislature. The CPI(M), riding on the slogan of industrialisation, won a crushing majority on its own with 176 seats. But the euphoria of that victory has dimmed sharply in the ferocious confrontation between the government and protesters in Nandigram, where a chemical hub was sought to be set up, and in Singur, where the Tatas plan to build a small-car plant. Fourteen people died in police firing at Nandigram on March 14, and six more in subsequent group clashes.

"What we learnt from Nandigram is that we should move fast, but cautiously... I admit that we failed to reach the masses. Before we explained what it was all about, what the chemical hub was, what benefits they would get, the opposition successfully misled the people," Bhattacharjee said. He said Nandigram would not go ahead, but a chemical hub was essential "in or around" the port city of Haldia. "If I fail, then it will go to Gujarat," he added.

Bhattacharjee made clear competition for investment was intense. West Bengal beat out seven other states to win the

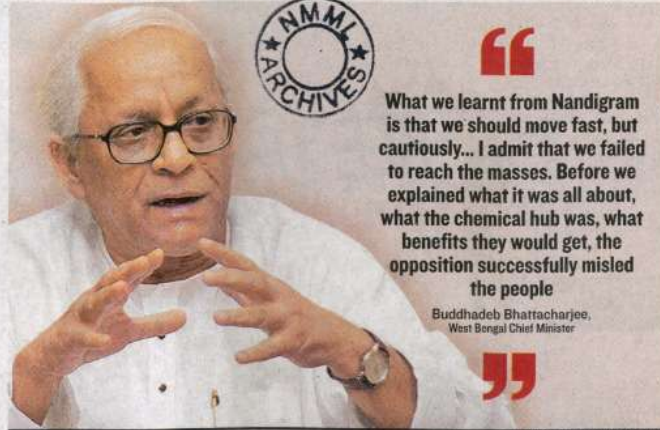
huge chemical hub project, whose anchor investor is Indian Oil Corporation. The project would also spawn downstream industries like polymers and rubber.

"We should speed up the process of industrialisation because new proposals are coming. We cannot just wait," Bhattacharjee said. "If I miss the trend, I will miss the bus. Because (investors) cannot wait for West Bengal for months together. They will just move to another state. There is keen competition between states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and West Bengal. Therefore time is a factor."

He admitted that there has been opposition from the CPI(M)'s Left Front partners. "We are still debating among ourselves the need for manufacturing investment in West Bengal. If we sit content with what we have done in agriculture, it will not help us. We have to move from agriculture to industry."

He said the "traditional left is a little confused", and the Trinamool Congress, the largest opposition party with 30 seats, was taking advantage of the situation.

"Without industry how do you progress? This is the general trend of all civilisation — from village to city, from agriculture to industry. You cannot stop it, you should not stop it. And for that you need private industry, private capital, you need big business. We need multinationalals — the only reservation is that



SUBHANKAR CHAKRABORTY/HT

we won't let them enter the retail sector.

"We need big investment, we need manufacturing industries. At the same time, we just cannot say we do not want FDI (foreign direct investment). We have discussed all these things in our party — FDI, SEZs (special economic zones), taking loans from the World Bank. But our Left partners are still vacillating."

Bhattacharjee described his vision of replicating the miracle of Haldia, which was a sleepy fishing village on the Haldi river

30 years ago and is now a thriving industrial town with 106 factories, on the opposite bank in Nandigram. "We thought we would build a bridge over the river and create another Haldia," he said a trifle wistfully.

But now that Nandigram will not happen, Bhattacharjee is determined to push ahead with Singur, where the Tatas are trying to buy land from 12,000 farmers. The Singur car factory would create 4,000 jobs and spawn a host of ancillary industries. "It will change the entire

economy of that area. It will change the quality of life in that area... Therefore Singur is very important for us." He said the Tatas, and the government, would do all they could do to train the "land-losers" to take up other occupations.

"Only a small number still oppose it, and they are being patronised by the opposition. But this is not the whole story. I think Singur is now a closed chapter. They have got the message that I just cannot roll back."

The chief minister said he has

tried very hard to reason with Mamata Banerjee, who mounted a 26-day hunger strike over Singur and has said she will never allow the plant to come up. "I am trying again and again to talk to the opposition. I have written at least six letters to Mamata Banerjee, to discuss and try a dialogue," said Bhattacharjee wryly. "I have not written six letters to any of my friends, boy or girl friends, in my college days."

Bhattacharjee said he was keenly aware that West Bengal received little or no major manufacturing investment after the Durgapur steel plant. Now, investors are flocking to the state, drawn by its political stability, law and order, and communal harmony.

So what differentiates Bhattacharjee from Gujarat's Narendra Modi? He says the "Left alternative" means supplying free books and mid-day meals in the state's 68,000 primary schools, covering 72% of the population in state-run hospitals and clinics, and setting up 600,000 self-help groups for 5.6 million women.

"Some economists think that the market economy is omnipotent. We don't think so. We live in a market economy but it marginalises a section of the people. Who will take care of them?" asks Bhattacharjee.

As an example, he said of the 38,700 villages in West Bengal, the government has identified 4,612 that are the "poorest of the poor." "We have to take care of them. This is the Left alterna-

tive," he said. "We have to protect people against the negative effects of a capitalist society... We have enrolled more than one million workers in the unorganised sector for provident fund."

Bhattacharjee told the *Hindustan Times* there were three major projects in the pipeline. The first was a seaport, the largest in India, on the Bay of Bengal, to take advantage of India's "Look East" policy and be the entrepot for trade with Southeast and East Asia. The second, an elevated mass-transit system in Kolkata using Czech technology, would cover a 46-km route from Joka to Sodepur. And finally, a new east-west corridor for the Metro, from Salt Lake to Howrah station.

The chief minister is also excited about horticulture and agricultural exports, and setting up cold storage and cold chains for vegetables — West Bengal produced 11.6 million tonnes last year, the most in the country. Flowers from the Kolkata market are now flown to the Netherlands.

The 63-year-old Bhattacharjee, a poet and playwright who has translated two Gabriel Garcia Marquez books, said he had no time now to write. He is currently reading Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish novelist.

With Rajiv Bagchi and Anirban Choudhury (FULL INTERVIEW ON www.hindustantimes.com)