

Sage of Indian communism

IN THE year Jyoti Basu was born, World War I began in Europe and Karl Marx had just arrived in India. The first biography of Karl Marx in an Indian language was published in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, in 1912. Mr Basu's death on Jan 17 at the age of 95 ended a life that almost exactly spanned the history of Marxism in India.

Born in July 1914, Mr Basu became a key propagator of Marxist ideas, a leader of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and later the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI-M. He was also chief minister of the state of West Bengal from 1977 to 2000, the longest tenure of any Indian chief minister.

His death may also mark the beginning of the end of the two major communist parties in India. Both fared poorly in the general elections last May. The CPI-M was reduced from 44 seats to 16 in the federal Parliament. In his own West Bengal, his party lost seats. The CPI-M also lost seats in its other stronghold, Kerala. The party will almost certainly lose the state elections in Kerala, scheduled for next year, and for the first time since 1977, it faces defeat in West Bengal next year as well.

This is not to say that the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Mao are disappearing from India. The spirit of Mao is alive and well in the hills and valleys of central and eastern India. "Maoist movements" are flourishing in remote areas occupied chiefly by tribal peoples.

The leaders of these Maoist movements are not cosmopolitan lawyers like Mr Basu was. Though they are intellectu-



Flowers left by mourners outside the Assembly House in Kolkata, India, on Tuesday. Tens of thousands of people thronged the streets to pay their last respects to veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu, who died on Sunday. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

als with urban roots, they are socially much closer to the people they mobilise than the higher-caste communists of Mr Basu's time.

There is irony in this. Mr Basu was a key figure in leading Indian communists down a constitutional path. Having been part of communist failures in the 1940s, he found his niche as a legislator, having

been elected to the state assembly in 1946.

In the late 1960s, he admonished a collection of young Maoists ("Naxalites" as they were called) from Kolkata's Presidency College who had sought, unsuccessfully, to burn down the chemistry laboratory. He addressed them as *aap* - the respectful form of "you", rather than the

condescending *tum* - and told them that only fascists burned down laboratories and libraries. Real communists didn't.

The incident illustrates the depth of his experiences in Europe in the 1930s. Studying law in Britain then, he witnessed the rise of fascism, the Spanish civil war and the outbreak of World War II. The Communist Party of Britain appeared

to have the recipe to counter fascism, and he joined the Communist Party of India on his return to India in 1940.

During his 22 years as chief minister, West Bengal went backwards economically. When communist-led coalitions first came to power in the late 1960s, West Bengal was one of India's two richest states. Its per capita income was 5 per cent better than that of Maharashtra, the state of which Mumbai is the capital. By the mid-1990s, West Bengal's per capita income was estimated to be only 70 per cent of Maharashtra's.

Mr Basu's achievements included carrying out land reform, establishing meaningful local government and building a grassroots political party that could drive through, and then benefit from, both the other measures.

His success in making the CPI-M a constitutionalist party is reflected in the tributes that have been paid to him since his death. He was regarded in his later years as a wise old constitutional figure, who could have become prime minister in 1996 if his party had not held him back. He later said the party made a great mistake in deterring him.

The future of Marxism or Maoism in India appears not to lie with Mr Basu's party or with the atrophying CPI. Rather, the future belongs with the Maoist cadres in the inhospitable districts of central and eastern India. They come from a different social class and a different time. Their exasperation with Mr Basu's constitutional politics may be just as great as his own exasperation with the futile insurgencies of Indian communist parties in the 1940s.

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