



LENIN STATUE

Belonia Town, India

23.24372, 91.468873



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Executive Summary

The presence of the Lenin statue in the Indian town of Belonia has been a long-time subject of heated debate between the local Communist Party and the ruling Bharat Janatiya Party. After the BJP won seats in the area, unsettling the long-term rule of the area by the Communist Party, the celebrations that followed saw the toppling of the Lenin statue by a mob. This case study explores how public memorialization can have political ramifications and how changes in government can exacerbate these tensions.

Introduction

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in the state of Tripura in India in March 2018, marking the end of the decades-long rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), known as CPI(M). Shortly after the election results were announced, a statue of Lenin in the town of Belonia was toppled by BJP supporters. The toppling of the statue and the aftermath of the event indicate the charged politics of memorialisation in India, a country that is becoming increasingly polarised.

Background

A Historic Election

The photo above depicts the statue of Communist icon Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin. It stood at College Square, in Belonia town in the state of Tripura, from 2013 until it was toppled in 2018. The 11.5ft fibre-glass statue was sculpted by local artist Krishna Debnath, and installed in Belonia by CPI(M), after the party began its 21st year of rule, having won the 2013 assembly elections. The statue was part of a municipal council initiative led by CPI(M) in Belonia town to 'beautify the city.'¹ According to local CPI(M) leader Comrade Tapas Datta – up to 20 statues were installed across Belonia town since the late 1990s, including statues of Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Vidyasagar and Kabi Nazrul. The statue depicted above was the only one of Lenin in the town.²

On Saturday, March 3, 2018, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a political coalition made up of centre-right and right-wing political parties and led by the BJP, India's ruling party, defeated CPI(M) in the local state election. BJP won 43 of the available 59 seats, toppling CPI(M) after 25 years of rule in the state and marking BJP's first victory in Tripura.³ This victory was unprecedented, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi declaring it 'ideological' as well as historical, and 'epoch-making.'⁴ In a series of tweets, the Prime Minister stated:

Time and again, election after election, the people of India are reposing their faith in the positive and development oriented agenda of the NDA. People do not have the time or respect for negative, disruptive and disconnected politics of any kind...It is a win for democracy over brute force and intimidation. Today peace and non-violence have prevailed over fear. We will provide Tripura the good government that the state deserves.⁵

Following this landmark victory, in the days following the announcement of the election results, there was widespread violence, with clashes between BJP and CPI(M) workers. The CPI(M) accused BJP members of vandalising their party offices in several different towns all across Tripura, including

¹ Esha Roy, "Tripura BJP workers, supporters bulldoze Lenin statue amid cries of 'Bharat Mata ki jai,'" *Indian Express*, March 6, 2018.

² *Ibid.*

³ BBC News, "India crowd pulls down Tripura Lenin statue after Communist defeat," *BBC News*, March 6, 2018.

⁴ Press Trust of India, "Tripura Verdict "An Epoch-Making One", Says PM Narendra Modi," *NDTV*, March 3, 2018.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Belonia,⁶ while the BJP state Vice President Subal Bhowmik blamed CPI(M) for the violence and injury caused to 49 BJP party activists (including workers and supporters) claiming that 'even police from the lower ranks were working at the behest' of the communist party.⁷ In turn, the CPI(M) accused the BJP of unleashing an 'unprecedented reign of terror' in Tripura following their victory,⁸ with state secretary Bijan Dhar claiming that 514 party activists were injured, more than 1,500 homes owned by party activists were attacked, and 196 houses were set on fire. He also claimed that violence occurred at party offices too, with 134 CPI(M) offices attacked and looted, 64 offices set on fire, and approximately 90 offices occupied by BJP supporters.⁹

The statue gained significance as a symbol of political tension, marking the national shift from the communist ideologies of CPI(M) and its direct contrast to those of the right-wing, Hindu nationalist BJP. Indian Supreme Court lawyer, Prashant Bhushan, calls the BJP a 'so-called nationalist party' and groups them with the Sangh Parivar (translation: the family of the RSS - a right-wing paramilitary volunteer organisation).¹⁰ The term 'Sangh Parivar' groups derived from the RSS to represent the movement 'the Hindutva ideology'¹¹ (or the ideology of the Hindu right) in India.¹² In policy, the BJP is enabling a redefined creation of India as a Hindu, Hindi-speaking country,¹³ especially intolerant of Islam.¹⁴

History of the Contestation

Initial Events

On the afternoon of Monday, March 5, 2018, 2 days after assembly election results were announced, BJP supporters toppled the statue with the help of a JCB excavator allegedly hired by the BJP. Cries of '*Bharat Mata ki jai*' ('Victory to Mother India') were heard from the crowd as the statue was toppled.¹⁵ This chant has, in recent history, been co-opted by the BJP as the tag line for the public's loyalty to the party. In 2019, Syed Shahnawaz Hussain, the national spokesperson of the BJP and former Union Minister, stated '*BJP ka darwaza kisi ke liye band nahi. Jo bhi Bharat Mata Ki Jai kahega usko humarein party mein swaagat hai*' ('The door to the BJP is not closed to anyone. Whoever says '*Bharat Mata ki jai*' is welcome in our party').¹⁶ Evoking the chant as the statue of Lenin was brought down links the act to the BJP regardless of the actual level of their top-down official involvement in the eyes of the public and the CPI(M). Some CPI(M) supporters likened the event to the fall of the Berlin Wall in its

⁶ India Today Web Desk, "Lenin statue in Tripura bulldozed by mob, Twitter divided," *India Today*, March 6, 2018.

⁷ HT Correspondent, "Violence in Tripura after BJP win; Lenin statue toppled, Section 144 in several areas," *Hindustan Times*, March 6, 2018.

⁸ Press Trust of India, "Vladimir Lenin's statue pulled down in Tripura," *Economic Times*, March 6, 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Punemirror Desk, "Attack on our office reeks of BJP, Sangh's frustration, says AAP", *PuneMirror*, January 4 2014

¹¹ Swamy Kalva, "Hindutva: The Larger than Life-size Dream Realized", *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 2021

¹² For more information on Hindutva, see Arvind Sharma, "On the Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva", *Education About Asia*, 25(1), 2020

¹³ Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History Of The World's Largest Democracy*, (India: Picador, 2007), 633-659.

¹⁴ Ministry of Law and Justice, "The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, No 47 of 2019, " *Gazette of India*, Extraordinary Part II Section 1, December 12, 2019.

¹⁵ Esha Roy, "Tripura BJP workers, supporters bulldoze Lenin statue amid cries of 'Bharat Mata ki jai'," *Indian Express*, March 6, 2018.

¹⁶ Raj Kumar, "For BJP entry chant Bharat Mata Ki Jai," *Telegraph India*, December 3, 2019.

significance and in the meaning ascribed to it by BJP supporters.¹⁷

There are several differing accounts of the events that took place in College Square that day. Comrade Tapas Datta, CPI(M)'s Belonia sub-division secretary, claimed that 'Eyewitnesses told me that after the statue fell, its head was dismembered from the body. And then, the BJP workers played football with Lenin's head.'¹⁸ BJP's South District Secretary Raju Nath, however, claimed that in the midst of the BJP's victory rally in Belonia town that afternoon, a bulldozer that was making its way through the crowds 'lost control and hit the railing around the statue' and that when this happened, 'the supporters surrounded the driver and made him bring down the statue.'¹⁹ Nath also denied charges that the JCB bulldozer was hired by the BJP, accusations that are widespread and widely believed, with most believing that the BJP itself, rather than overzealous supporters, directly toppled the statue.²⁰

Responses from Political Parties

The level of public and political involvement in the dispute is unique in this contestation. Whilst the actual version of events is contested, despite videos of the event going viral, the act of the toppling of the statue drew both praise and criticism and was assigned wider significance by local political parties.

CPI(M) state secretary Dhar stated that the incident was part of the wider violence that took place after the BJP-led coalition won the assembly election, stating, 'our party workers and supporters are being attacked physically...our offices are being occupied, vandalised and set on fire [...] The bringing down of the statue is nothing but Communism phobia.'²¹ The CPI(M) indeed referred to the destruction of the statue as 'symbolic of the rabid anti-communist, anti-democratic fascistic character of the RSS,' referring to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist cultural and paramilitary volunteer organisation.²² The RSS has close ideological and organisational links with the BJP. The leader of the CPI(M) party, Sitaram Yechury, announced a country-wide protest after the statue was vandalised, trying to gain support against the BJP in other states as well as Tripura.²³

The BJP's South District Secretary Nath, on the other hand, described that the toppling of the statue was caused by a 'natural feeling' in the townspeople, who he claimed had been 'oppressed' by the CPI(M), who would 'impose their ideology' on the town's citizens.²⁴ He further described this 'overflow of anger', stating that:

¹⁷ Ratnadip Choudhury, "Where Tripura Lenin Statue Stood, Theories On Vandalism Also Pulled Down," *NDTV*, March 9, 2018.

¹⁸ Esha Roy, "Tripura BJP workers, supporters bulldoze Lenin statue amid cries of 'Bharat Mata ki jai,'" *Indian Express*, March 6, 2018.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Richa Taneja, "Lenin Statue Razed In Tripura: A Look At Communist Icon's Ideology," *NDTV*, March 6, 2018.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Esha Roy, "Tripura BJP workers, supporters bulldoze Lenin statue amid cries of 'Bharat Mata ki jai,'" *Indian Express*, March 6, 2018.

For years, there has been resentment against this statue of Lenin. It was built by the municipality and funded by the taxpayers' money. Why should the taxpayer have to finance a statue of Lenin? Even if it was a statue of our former CPI(M) chief minister Nripen Chakraborty, nobody would have touched it — he was one of us and belonged to the country. But what does this foreigner Lenin have to do with our people?²⁵

BJP spokesperson Subrata Chakraborty agreed that the contestation was caused by a nationalistic sentiment in the town, where the main objection to the statue was that a foreigner was being commemorated instead of an Indian citizen: 'People of the area wanted to erect statues of national heroes like Swami Vivekananda, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and Mother Teresa instead of Lenin since long. Whatever happened in Belonia is the outcome of public fury.'²⁶ The toppling of the statue indicates that, in India's current politically polarised state and under its current populist government, contesting ideologies can intersect with the politics of memorialisation to create disputes over national memory, both between political parties and between citizens. The BJP evidently saw the memorialisation and perceived deification of Lenin as a betrayal of the Indian people by a party that valued its communist ideology over its Indian-ness: Subramaniam Swamy, a BJP politician serving in the Upper House of Parliament, called Lenin a 'terrorist' and suggested that CPI(M) should re-install the statue in its party headquarters and 'worship it if they so wish.'²⁷

Although some BJP members, such as Belonia's newly-elected legislator from the BJP, Arun Chandra Bhowmik, stated that the destruction of the statue was caused by the reaction of 'fringe' elements of the party, and thus the event did not align with the party's true ideology, and the party could not be held responsible, other BJP supporters in Belonia stated that the action was a legitimate political gesture, following the precedent set by the CPI(M) in their more than two decades of power.²⁸ Nath stated, 'In 1993, the Left came, and till 2018, it has been 25 years, When they came to power, they broke several offices of Congress, broke statues of ex-prime minister Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.'²⁹ Memorialisation has thus been a point of contention in the town for many years, with political parties placing importance on the issue of who is publicly celebrated and considering it within their remit to correct what is seen as aberrant acts of memorialisation.

Decision-Making Processes

The driver of the JCB bulldozer, Ashish Pal, was arrested shortly after the statue was toppled, after which he was released on bail. The statue was returned to the municipality for storage.³⁰ The Ministry of Home Affairs sent out advisors within hours to ensure the state dealt sternly with those responsible.³¹ Section 144, which prohibits assembly of more than five people, was already in place in many areas before the statue was destroyed and was extended by a day following the incident.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ HT Correspondent, "Violence in Tripura after BJP win; Lenin statue toppled, Section 144 in several areas," *Hindustan Times*, March 6, 2018.

²⁷ Raman Swamy, "History cannot be erased by pulling down statues," *National Herald*, March 11, 2018.

²⁸ Ratnadip Choudhury, "Where Tripura Lenin Statue Stood, Theories On Vandalism Also Pulled Down," *NDTV*, March 9, 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Esha Roy, "Tripura BJP workers, supporters bulldoze Lenin statue amid cries of 'Bharat Mata ki jai'," *Indian Express*, March 6, 2018.

³¹ Ratnadip Choudhury, "Where Tripura Lenin Statue Stood, Theories On Vandalism Also Pulled Down," *NDTV*, March 9, 2018.

Rajnath Singh, Union Minister for Home Affairs, conferred with the Director General of police to ensure peace in the state in the remaining time before the new government was sworn in (on 8th March 2018).³² The state's priority was to ensure that there were adequate central security forces and state police personnel on hand to maintain law and order.³³ Other decision-makers in the state such as the Governor of Tripura, Tathagata Roy, decided not to take any further action following the toppling of the statue – Roy tweeted, 'What one democratically elected government can do another democratically elected government can undo. And vice versa.'³⁴

Whilst no official remedy for the destruction of the statue was offered by the new BJP state government, BJP politicians in Tripura and elsewhere in India used the opportunity to threaten other monuments across India in a bid to rid Indian public spaces of 'un-Indian' or 'foreign' influence. BJP's Tamil Nadu party leader H Raja on Facebook threatened the destruction of the Dravidian icon Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, the late Indian social anti-caste activist and politician. His post, which went viral shortly before it was deleted, stated:

Who is Lenin? What is his connection with India? What is the connection between Communism and India? Lenin's statue was broken down in Tripura. Today, it is Lenin's statue in Tripura. Tomorrow, it will be the caste zealot EV Ramasamy's (Periyar) statue in Tamil Nadu.³⁵

MK Stalin, opposition leader in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly and the President of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, which reveres the figure of Periyar, demanded H Raja to be arrested for inciting violence.³⁶ The DMK declared plans to organise protests in Tamil Nadu over the BJP's threats to Periyar's statue, with DMK spokesperson Saravanan describing the threat as 'pure hatred. This is the Talibanisation of India. This is political vandalism at its worst.'³⁷

In response to the outrage that these statements sparked, 'Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Affairs Minister Rajnath Singh condemned these incidents and asked states to take stern action against those accountable.'³⁸

There was also an alleged retaliatory attack by students belonging to a left-wing student's union vandalised a bust of right-wing ideologue Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee in Kolkata in West Bengal,³⁹ a state which also has a history of long rule by the communist party.

In the following year, a statue of Lenin was erected at the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s district office in Tirunelveli, a district in Tamil Nadu. It was unveiled by the party general secretary

³² HT Correspondent, "Violence in Tripura after BJP win; Lenin statue toppled, Section 144 in several areas," *Hindustan Times*, March 6, 2018.

³³ Scroll Staff, "Tripura: Lenin statue knocked down in Belonia town, Left blames BJP workers," *Scroll India*, March 6, 2018.

³⁴ India Today Web Desk, "Lenin statue in Tripura bulldozed by mob, Twitter divided," *India Today*, March 6, 2018.

³⁵ Raman Swamy, "History cannot be erased by pulling down statues," *National Herald*, March 11, 2018.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Online Desk, "Attacks on statues: After Lenin in Tripura, Periyar in Tamil Nadu, Ambedkar in Meerut, Mahatma Gandhi statue damaged in Kerala's Kannur," *New Indian Express*, March 7, 2018.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Sitaram Yechury on the occasion of Lenin's 95th death anniversary.⁴⁰ Party polit bureau member G Ramakrishnan said, 'after the incidents in Tripura, we were deeply disturbed. The communist party cannot be destroyed by pulling down statues.'⁴¹

Despite the controversies and the pushback from various quarters, the ability to enact decisions around memorialisation is a priority for several political parties. Within Tripura itself, the new government planned a new education policy and changes in street names in order to preserve and promote the BJP's Hindu-nationalist vision of India. BJP state in-charge Sunil Deodhar promised that 'the education policy will change totally... National leaders' histories that are missing in the school syllabus would be introduced.'⁴² The previous Communist government had made similar changes when in power, inserting the Russian and French Revolutions into high school History textbooks. The BJP also planned to rename the roads, with the Marx-Engels Sarani Lane in the capital of Tripura particularly highlighted as a road whose name was due to be changed.⁴³

Summary and Conclusions

The statue of Lenin in Belonia, Tripura, was allegedly toppled by a mixture of BJP supporters and party members. Responses to the event, both from official decision-makers and political parties, were far from uniform, with some officials concerned regarding issues of safety and security, whilst other politicians utilised the event to accuse other parties of misconduct or to question monuments elsewhere. This case raises questions about how disputes over memorials and monuments can often act as political tools for parties to manipulate, to gain legitimacy by positioning themselves as the sole caretakers of national memory and values. This case also provides an example of a destruction of a public monument caused by political differences, as opposed to communal or structural. It is also an example of how the BJP is producing a culture of selective historical amnesia and re-scripting Indian history to remove influence from foreigners. Other examples of this could include but are not limited to the erection of the new parliament complex, the Jallianwala Bagh museum renovation and changes to Indian secondary education to promote a Hindu-nationalist narrative of Indian history.

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⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² India Today Web Desk, "Lenin statue in Tripura bulldozed by mob, Twitter divided," *India Today*, March 6, 2018.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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